
Stoicism and Disobedience Interconnection

The Stoic way of life described in Epictetus's *Enchiridion* (135 A.C.E.) is characterized by a freedom from anxiety and being highly aware of the limitations of humanity. *The Enchiridion* is a list of 52 principles that, by following them, would allow one to become as great as the philosopher Socrates. The deconstruction *The Enchiridion* in this essay will show that the Stoic way of life supports the practice of civil disobedience as used by Martin Luther King Jr. during the 1960s civil rights movement. In "Letter from a Birmingham Jail (1963)," Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. defines and defends civil disobedience to the white clergymen of Birmingham, Alabama. According to King, one commits civil disobedience when "[he] breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice" (King, 7). Acts of civil disobedience that King took part in and organized during the civil rights movement include bus boycotts, lunch counter sit-ins, and violating Jim Crow laws. He also led mass, televised marches and gave speeches that reached thousands of Americans.

At first glance, King's actions may seem contradictory to the Stoic way of life, however, but a majority of Epictetus's principles had to have been followed for civil disobedience to be effective, namely control, reputation, and patience. A recurring topic in *The Enchiridion* is control. Epictetus begins the manual by saying what things are in our control and what things are not. Things that are in are control include, "opinion, pursuit, desire, aversion, and....our own actions." (Epictetus, 1). Things which are not include, "our body, property, reputation, command, and...Whatever are not our own actions." (Epictetus, 1). Understanding that one cannot control, nor predict the actions and thoughts of others would be useful in the practice of civil disobedience. In his letter, Martin Luther King Jr. references workshops on nonviolence (King, 2.) These workshops were part of a process of self-purification in order to teach those participating in sit-ins, boycotts, and protest how to not retaliate. By understanding what is in one's control and what is not, people are better able to come to terms with the fact that other people might try to harm them, verbally and physically.

However, by practicing Stoicism, protesters would be better at controlling their responses, as our own actions are things we control. The example Epictetus uses is of someone at the bath. Before going to bathe, one should remind themselves of what happens at the bath and "if any hindrance arises in bathing" one must think, "It was not only to bathe that I desired, but to keep my mind in a state conformable to nature; and I will not keep it if I am bothered at things that happen," (Epictetus, 4). Before a protest or a sit-in, one should remind themselves of the nature of their actions, meaning the purpose and possible outcomes of these actions. By mentally fortifying themselves, one would be able to withstand any disturbances. This is key in King's

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nonviolent approach to civil disobedience. According to Epictetus if you prepare yourself for the worst, you can never say, “It was not worth so much,” (Epictetus, 33). All outcomes become favorable outcomes and when you are risking your freedom, your livelihood, and your life--King sacrificed all three--for a cause such as equality for blacks, you truly have to believe that it is worth everything that must be sacrificed.

Another main theme of *Enchiridion* is to not worry about what others think of you, especially since reputation is out of our control. Martin Luther King Jr. discusses the different types of people he comes into contact with, and their views on his actions and those of people involved in the civil rights movement. These types of people are: the complacent blacks, who “are so drained of self-respect....that they have adjusted to segregation,” the middle-class blacks who “have become insensitive to the problems of the masses,” the black nationalists who “have lost faith” (King, 8) and “advocate violence,” the white allies who have “grasped the meaning of [the] Social Revolution,” the white racists who support the “disease of segregation,” and the white moderates who “is more devoted to order than to justice.” (King, 6). Each of these groups has a different opinion about the reputation of King and other advocates but that doesn’t stop the Civil Rights Movement from trudging on.

Epictetus believes that anyone who misjudges another person, harms someone, or speaks badly of someone, is only deceiving themselves (Epictetus, 42). So the middle-class blacks are deceiving themselves by not fighting for their own rights and by becoming comfortable in a system built on inequality. The white moderates are deceiving themselves by thinking they are doing the right thing by telling blacks to wait and, as King writes, “paternalistically [believing] he can set the timetable for another man's freedom” (King, 6). King claims that blacks had waited for over 340 years and that the word wait, which “rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity” in actuality means “Never.” (King, 6).

Knowing when postponement is futile is another major component of *The Enchiridion* that is also part of civil disobedience. Some may look at Rule 15 of *The Enchiridion* and try to dispute the claim that Stoicism supports direct, nonviolent action but I disagree. This passage reads, “Is anything brought around to you? Put out your hand and take your share with moderation. Does it pass by you? Don't stop it. Is it not yet come? Don't stretch your desire towards it, but wait till it reaches you.”(Epictetus, 15) Epictetus is basically saying to wait, which King does not wish to do any longer. However, when Epictetus says this, he is only referring to materialistic things such as a spouse, a public office, or riches.

Throughout *The Enchiridion* he dismisses the usefulness and importance of material things, preferring to attain spiritual wealth. Equality and being free from persecution based on skin color is not materialistic, it is a human right and though Epictetus writes to “wait till it reaches you” in regards to some things, he also writes “don't wish to be a general, or a senator, or a consul, but

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to be free.”(Epictetus, 19). King and other civil rights advocates are pushing for freedom. Epictetus encourages Stoics to, in every affair, “consider what precedes and follows, and then undertake it.” (Epictetus, 29) King clearly does this as he describes waiting for the election of Albert Bottwell and negotiating about the signs denoting segregated business. He then considers the extent of racism in the south as he writes about vicious mobs, lynchings, hate-filled policemen, murder, and the “twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society” (King, 6.) He considers what has to be done and what the outcome could be, whether good or bad. Epictetus writes, “When you have evaluated all this, if your inclination still holds, then go to war.” (Epictetus, 29) Civil disobedience during the Civil Rights Movement is that war.

Overall, practicing Stoicism would have proved very beneficial to those who took part of the Civil Rights Movement and anyone involved in any sort of civil disobedience. Despite being in jail while writing this letter, King is unabashed in the fact that once he is released he is going to continue pushing, in Alabama and throughout the South. He does not care that he does not have the support of the white clergymen and according to Epictetus he shouldn't because, “If you ever happen to turn your attention to externals, so as to wish to please anyone, be assured that you have ruined your scheme of life” (Epictetus, 23). King would ruin his scheme of life, and would not have been able to accomplish so much had he only been focused on pleasing those around him and giving in to the whims of men. Stoicism promotes having attainable goals with a logical path to reach them, having a clear mind and the ability to control one's own thoughts and actions, and not focusing on the wants of others but on what is right.

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