

Civil disobedience definition

Government



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The extremely simplified definition of civil disobedience given by Webster's Dictionary is "nonviolent opposition to a law through refusal to comply with it, on grounds of conscience." Thoreau in "Civil Disobedience" and Martin Luther King in "Letter from Birmingham Jail" both argue that laws thought of as unjust in one's mind should not be adhered to. In Herman Melville's "Bartleby," a man named Bartleby is thought of by many to be practicing civil disobedience. His actions are nonviolent, and he refuses to comply with anything his boss says.

But his behavior has nothing to do with morals. Bartleby is merely a lonely guy who does not wish to work and has nothing to do with civil disobedience. Thoreau says that if injustice "is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then I say break the law" (Jacobus 134). He is personally giving permission for an individual to ignore anything he or she finds morally unacceptable. However, in "Bartleby," Bartleby's boss places no unjust laws and assigns no unjust work.

He simply asks Bartleby to do easy tasks such as, "when those papers are all copied, I will compare them with you", or, "just step around the Post Office, won't you? And see if there is anything for me" (Melville 116). The boss, who is also the narrator, never requests Bartleby to perform any difficult chores. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s interpretation of an unjust law is, "a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself" (Jacobus 159).

The injustice described here by King also does not match the characterization of Bartleby's boss. Bartleby needs no civil disobedience

since nothing could be considered unjust in the boss" s management. Even if an unjust act were placed against Bartleby, he would not have had any cares about the injustice. He was a man who needed a place to live and chose to be a law-copyist. He has no desire to do any work and no desire to interact with other humans. Anytime an order was given, the same response would reply from Bartleby" s mouth: " I would prefer not to" (Melville).

Bartleby did not weigh the issues of morality and immorality in his assignments. He just does not want to deal with others. When asked to look over some work with Turkey and Nipping, he refuses. His boss offers him a home, and he refuses this as well. The ending footnote to " Bartleby" states that Bartleby" s previous profession was a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letters Office in Washington. The dead letters he handled had no association to any living person. Bartleby was accustomed to working at a place where dealing with man is unnecessary.

As Thoreau says, " Dead letters! Does it not sound like dead men? " (Melville 140). Bartleby has no connection with civil disobedience. King and Thoreau" s ideas of what civil disobedience is do not match up with the actions of Bartleby. Bartleby was not trying to make a statement against unjust laws by not abiding by them. He was just a loner. All his refusals to do what was ordered stemmed from his need to be separated from humanity. Bartleby only wanted to live by himself with nothing but his own thoughts to deal with.