

# Compare and contrast plato`s critos to king`s letter

[History](#), [American History](#)



Dr. Martin Luther King's letter, addressed to " My Dear Fellow Clergymen," written while he was " confined here in the Birmingham city jail" represents an attempt by King to compel fellow clergymen who have been critical of his tactics in the pursuit of civil rights to join his cause. The letter also justifies the use of those tactics criticized by King's fellow clergymen, and offers a spiritual and philosophical basis for King and his fellow activists' actions.

In many ways, the letter is similar to the dialogue between Socrates and Crito in " The Crito" when Socrates is facing execution for his own civil activism and crimes of philosophical thought and action. Each of these documents represents the ethical, spiritual and social vision of these renowned thinkers and " revolutionaries," but the largest difference between the two men (and the resulting documents in question) existed in a dichotomy of pure logic versus spiritual devotion and whether or not " unjust' laws may be broken in the pursuit of justice.

In the " Crito" Socrates refuses the help of those who wish to break him out of his prison and save his life. In refusing their aid, Socrates explains his reasons in a logical fashion based primarily on rationality and morality. He states: " For I am and always have been one of those natures who must be guided by reason, whatever the reason may be which upon reflection appears to me to be the best; and now that this fortune has come upon me, I cannot put away the reasons which I have before given: the principles which I have hitherto honored and revered I still honor, and unless we can find other and better principles on the instant" (Crito).

By contrast, King's letter offers a rational, scholarly tone, but one which is tempered with religiosity and spiritual reference.. The letter presents a rational appeal and an emotional appeal, which are united in historical allusion, Biblical reference and philosophical depth. King repeatedly appeals to a shared sense of religion in his letter; he also cites Biblical examples to bolster his argument.

Responding to the criticism that his actions and the actions of his followers, even though non-violent in practice, ultimately resulted in violence on the behalf of the white Southerners who beat and jailed the protestor (and sometimes lynched or otherwise killed African Americans), King compared the fight for civil rights with the fight of Jesus to spread the gospel. " Isn't this like condemning Jesus because his unique God-consciousness and never-ceasing devotion to God's will precipitated the evil act of crucifixion? [... ] Society must protect the robbed and punish the robber. "

Responding to accusations that he was an extremist, King retorted " Was not Jesus an extremist for love: " Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you. " Was not Amos an extremist for justice: " Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. " Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: " I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus. " (King)

Socrates in " Crito" maintains a sense of pure rationality and measures his actions in terms of what is logical and just. From these premises I proceed to argue the question whether I ought or ought not to try to escape without the

consent of the Athenians: and if I am clearly right in escaping, then I will make the attempt; but if not, I will abstain. " (Crito) The similarity with King's convictions is in the belief in some kind of pure justice which exists out and above human influence and impulse. For King this justice was of Divine origin, for Socrates it lay in the measure of moral right and wrong. King's appeal via religion and spirituality was based in a desire for unity and understanding.

While he denied accusations of extremity or of inciting violence, he admitted that the impulse for civil rights was, by his reckoning, the will of God. " But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. " If those words sounded volatile, other statements were steeped in a desire for unity and brotherhood. I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. " (King)

Socrates in " Crito" appeals to the sense of the individual above the multitude. If one man is right then the multitudes should be ignored. It is more important to be an individual with strong integrity and morals than to be part of a brotherhood or social order which incites immoral actions. Think not of life and children first, and of justice afterwards, but of justice first, that you may be justified before the princes of the world below. For neither will

you nor any that belong to you be happier or holier or juster in this life, or happier in another, if you do as Crito bids. " (Crito) In addition to appealing to a sense of spiritual and religious nobility, King appealed by use of historical examples. to a sense of rationality and the same sense of liberty and justice which had inspired the American Constitution and Bill of Rights.

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we stiff creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. " (King) King advises that the will of all people is toward freedom and equality. " Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself, and that is what has happened to the American Negro. (King) By forwarding the notion that civil rights are an inevitable outgrowth of both God's will and the flow of history, King is, in effect, offering a justification for his tactics and philosophies regarding civil rights. The justification for the elements of passive resistance which had led to violent confrontation is also based in King's ideas of justice. King's idea is that God's law is the highest law and that man's laws may be broken when they obviously disagree with or even insult God's law " You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws.

This is certainly a legitimate concern. [... ]The answer lies in the fact that there fire two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the Brat to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I

would agree with St. Augustine that " an unjust law is no law at all. " King further explains his notion of just and unjust laws by saying " A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. (King) By contrast, Socrates in " Crito" puts the law and social ethic above the desires or will of the individual. For Socrates and King justice was the highest form of law but each of these men interpreted the meaning and practice of justice amid a societies who considered them dangerous and provocative. In King's estimation and unjust law was not truly a law since man could be bound only by God's law. For Socrates the laws of man stood as the laws so long as a man willingly bound himself to that society as he had done with Athens.

Because he was a free and rational person who knew the laws of the society he lived in and because he willingly lived under those laws, Socrates did not believe in breaking those laws even to save his own life. King may have accepted the offer of escape. reading it as God's will, Socrates denied his own escape because he rationally determined that braking the law to save his life would not serve justice. The central issue of King's letter is to call his fellow clergymen to arms in a sense of brotherhood and in communal pursuit of Divine understanding and the submission to God's will that humanity dissolve its racial prejudices and abuses.

For Socrates, the rational determination of a social order and the individual's acquiescence to that social order formed the central thesis in " Crito. " The difference in spirituality is dubious due to Socrates stating early in the " Crito" of his conviction in a dream-vision and his submission to fate or gods

is expressed in his words "" Very well, Crito; if such is the will of God, I am willing; but my belief is that there will be a delay of a day. " (Crito)

In conclusion, King's multi-faceted appeal to his fellow clergymen stands not only as an adequate and convincing record of his philosophical, religious and moral justifications for his political actions, but the letter stands as a testimony to King's learnedness, sincerity, and moral and spiritual convictions. Socrates' dialogue in " Crito" stands a testament to the purity of reason and ethical impulse that resided in him despite his looming execution.