

Civil disobedience in the mind of socrates



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Civil Disobedience in the Mind of Socrates

Civil disobedience is a practice that has been studied and exhibited for thousands of years. This practice is defined as “ the refusal to obey certain laws or governmental demands for the purpose of influencing legislation or government policy” (1). It is a form of peaceful protest based on the idea that if a movement occurs solely on the refusal to obey the law, the government will weaken and therefore have to listen to the people and change the law accordingly. This idea can be seen across many works of literature, and perhaps one of the most famous instances where this idea is contemplated is in Plato’s *The Apology* and *Crito*. Throughout these works, it is evident that Socrates does not believe civil disobedience is permissible under any circumstances, which can be seen through his defense to the jury in *The Apology* and his actions carried out in *Crito*.

Civil disobedience is a widely controversial idea that is discussed in many works of literature. For centuries, many people used this powerful tool in order to create immense change to the government that controls them. Used correctly, disobeying the law can be an eye-opener for any government, and in order to restore structure in the government, the law would be changed to suit the needs of its constituents. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. dedicated his entire life to utilizing this practice into gaining civil rights for African Americans. He led a powerful movement in which thousands of protesters held peaceful demonstrations in order to have their voice heard. Although they were faced with a violent counter movement driven by the need to end any chance of civil justice for all Americans, they were able to state their message through simple acts and get the attention of their government. This

peaceful movement eventually led to an enormous leap in civil rights for African Americans. However, Dr. King made a vital point in distinguishing the differences between civil disobedience and the actual ambition for change.

It is important to understand that civil disobedience and a need for change are not synonyms for each other. This idea is explored in the Letters from Birmingham Jail, in which Dr. King wrote to the clergy members. One can have the desire to change an injustice in government without participating in breaking the law. On the contrary, one can break the law without wanting change and not considering the effects it may have on their government. This idea is portrayed through the idea of the “white moderates,” who Dr. King describes as people who see a problem or injustice with the law and desire change, but do not participate in the civil disobedience required to create that change.

This idea can be applied to Socrates and his stance against civil disobedience. Looking at The Apology, we can see that Socrates wanted change. His defense consisted almost entirely of criticisms for the Athenian government. Therefore, he did not believe that the Athenian government was completely justified, or in fact, believed he should be convicted of the charges against him. In the eyes of Dr. King, Socrates was in the same category as the “white moderates.” Socrates wanted change, he could determine right from wrong, and addressed the issues he had with the government in front of his jury. However, when his sentence was announced, he fully accepted it as the law and did nothing to escape his fate. Therefore, he was not able to participate in civil disobedience because it was morally

wrong, and he felt as if following the law is more important, even if it is not just.

This idea is further developed in *Crito*, which is the discussion between Socrates and his old friend, Crito, while he is being held captive before his execution. Throughout this dialogue, Socrates' position on civil disobedience is further uncovered and it becomes clear to see that Socrates does not support the practice of civil disobedience under any circumstances.

This dialogue takes place at dawn before Socrates is due for his execution. He was convicted by the Athenian jury, and Socrates fully accepted his punishment, even though he did not agree with the charges. Crito pleads with Socrates to escape his cell before the execution because the sentencing was not justified. Although Socrates can easily escape his fate, he chooses not to. This is an important idea when distinguishing Socrates' stance on civil disobedience. Although Socrates believes change is needed for the Athenian government and clearly expresses that idea to the jury, he does not follow up his beliefs through his actions. Therefore, he is comparable to the "white moderates," in which Socrates wants change, but does not participate in the actions needed to provide means for that change.

Although Crito pleads and argues with Socrates in order for him to escape death, Socrates is firm about his decision. He believes it is morally wrong to go against the law, knowing that it would weaken the central government. He expresses the idea that by choosing to live in a governed place, you are morally responsible to follow the law of the land. Both Dr. King and Socrates express the idea of natural law and the rights that humans have at birth.

What is different between the two is Dr. King thrives on civil disobedience and utilizes the benefits of this practice in order to gain civil rights for African Americans. On the other hand, Socrates believes in these natural rights, or truth, but feels as if it is more important to follow the law that governs you. Where Dr. King believes it is morally right to thrive for justice at any cost, Socrates feels as if he is morally obligated to follow the law.

Although there is some truth in the obligation to follow the law that governs you, I disagree with Socrates' position on civil disobedience. I believe that in order to make actual change, you need to disobey the law that is an injustice to one's natural rights. Although Socrates made a stance by accepting his punishment, there was no change in government that arose from his actions. However, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led the Civil Rights Movement through peaceful protests. Although it was a long process and many of the demonstrators were tempted to become violent when coerced by the police or citizens who believed in white supremacy, they were able to make actual change.

I disagree with Socrates in the idea that following the law, even when the that law is unjust, is morally right. I believe that protecting one's natural law, or human rights, is morally justified. Taking actions to change government policy to create a law based on what is fair for every citizen that is apart of that dominion, is an obligation to all people. A government is composed of everyday people, who can make mistakes. Congresspeople and juries alike make mistakes and misjudgements, and it is not the obligation of citizens to follow every law that is put into action. Laws are a crucial part in creating a functioning government. However, it is the duty of those who live in that

<https://assignbuster.com/civil-disobedience-in-the-mind-of-socrates/>

dominion to understand the diversity of everyone who lives there. A government should be fair and equal, and civil disobedience is a vital practice in order to make change in government. This is why protesting and free speech is legal in many democratic nations in the modern world. Without the input from those who must follow the law, the government jeopardizes a more violent defiance. A government becomes more functional and healthy when the voices of its constituents are heard, and civil disobedience is an imperative factor in making this happen.

Throughout Plato's works of literature, it is evident to see that Socrates does not support the use of civil disobedience in order to create change. Although his defense in *The Apology* proves that he believes the Athenian government is wrong, he does participate in breaking the law in order to make a statement. He believes it is his duty as a citizen of Athens to follow the law that governs, no matter if it is right or wrong. In *Crito*, Socrates' position on civil disobedience is further enhanced when he is given an opportunity to escape death. Even in a matter of life and death, it is evident that Socrates believes it is more important to follow the law.

Bibliography

[1] "The Definition of Civil Disobedience." Dictionary. com. N. p., n. d. Web. 20 Oct. 2016.