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## Obedience

Socrates believed in the power of truth and justice. In *The Apology*, he made the claim that he was the one who spoke the truth and in *The Republic*, he developed a society dedicated to unity and oneness based on truth and justice. Socrates' ideas put forth in both of these dialogues were radical – they offered critical analyses of what was common, accepted, and understood within society. Both *The Republic* and *The Apology* dissented from the status quo. In *Crito*, Socrates willingly accepted the word of the government. He respected the very laws that sentenced him to death. In *The Apology*, and in *The Republic* to some extent, Socrates negotiated with what he saw as the enemies of the truth. Even though Socrates adamantly disagreed with what the law said, he agreed to accept its punishment, as Martin Luther King Jr. did during the civil rights movement. Like Martin Luther King Jr., Socrates believed that “One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty” (King). In *The Apology*, Socrates was not afraid of the crimes he was being accused of: “to be afraid of death is only another form of thinking that one is wise when one is not; it is to think that one knows what one does not know” (Plato 29a). In fact, he was proud of his actions, and admitted them openly in court. Socrates did not escape from prison because by dissenting he agreed to live according to the beliefs of the state. If no one agreed to obey the law, civilization would deteriorate into anarchy, chaos, and

disorder, presenting no possibility for peace. Socrates first rebels against the state then later he says one should follow and abide by the word of the state. This shows that Socrates believed that full justice requires obedience. On the one hand, in *The Republic* and *The Apology*, Socrates offered a harsh critique of the state. On the other hand, in *Crito*, Socrates yielded to and obeyed the authority. There is an uncertain friction between the allegedly extremist views demonstrated in *The Apology* and *The Republic* where Socrates presents a radically reformed vision of society, and the apparently traditional philosophy of the *Crito* where Socrates expresses his extraordinary love for the law.

Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon charged Socrates with heresy and corruption of the youth. According to Socrates himself, he was charged with “Committing an injustice, in that he inquires into things below the earth and in the sky, and makes the weaker argument defeat the stronger, and teaches others to follow his example” (Plato 19b). The Assembly, a judiciary panel in Athens, eventually found Socrates guilty and sentenced him to death. Socrates’ life was devoted to talking to people, he did not teach, he only spoke. He was a philosopher. In *The Republic*, he shows his vision for an ideal society ruled by “philosopher kings.” His visions were radical; he was, by nature, a dissenter.

Socrates honored the state even though he devoted his entire life to questioning the conventions and standards accepted by society. Socrates believed that opposition and protest are required in order for a state to be just. Socrates understood that people who belong to a society must seek to change and contest the laws dictated by the state.

Socrates remained in prison not because he accepted his charges as true, but because he agreed and consented to live by the law. In the *Crito*, he puts forth and agrees to the question “Is it true, as we have often agreed before, that there is no sense in which an act of injustice is good or honorable?” (Plato 49b). Socrates also makes the assertion that “it is never right to commit injustice or return injustice or defend one’s self against injury by retaliation” (Plato 49e). If he were to escape from prison, he would not only harm himself, but he would harm the state, too. Socrates says, “If we leave this place without first persuading the State to let us go, are we or are we not doing an injury...” (Plato 50a). In other words, it is also an injustice to simply accept the accusations put forth by the state. If people disobeyed the law, the state would deteriorate into a condition of anarchy. Socrates had the chance to express his anguish and distress in trial. He did not feel a need to further rebel by escaping from prison – such an act would be a juvenile injury to the state. There is tension between the ways he presents himself in the *Crito* and *The Apology* – in *The Apology*, he is a maverick, contesting false assertions forced upon him, but in the *Crito*, he expresses great care for the state. Socrates’ actions were similar to those of Martin Luther King Jr. during the Civil Rights movement in the 1960’s – they both believed in the power of negotiation.

In his letter from the Birmingham City Jail, Martin Luther King Jr. presents his defense, as Socrates did during his trial in *The Apology*. King believed in the power of negotiation in combination with direct-action: “The purpose of our direct-action program is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation” (King). Socrates also used persuasion during his trial - in *The Apology*, he parleys with the state. Socrates would not agree to go to jail “without first persuading the

State to let us [him] go” (Plato 50a). Socrates and King both believed that disobeying the law is an act of injustice. Therefore, if people wish to dissent from the regulations of society, they must be willing to accept their penalty. King and Socrates yielded to their respective punishments; King went to jail and Socrates was eventually put to death. As in Socrates’ defense, there is great deal of strain in King’s reasoning. Martin Luther King Jr. was a man who devoted his entire life to reforming society. He led tremendous protests and sit-ins in opposition of the norm – he was a dissenter. Be that as it may, he still took responsibility for his actions by serving time in jail. King believed in the state as well.

We can try to explain the contrasting arguments put forth by Socrates and Martin Luther King Jr. in their respective texts can be partially explained by defining what they each meant by obedience. Merleau-Ponty says,

“Xenophon makes Socrates say that one may obey the laws in wishing for them to change, as one fights a war in wishing for peace. Thus it is not that the laws are good but that they pertain to order, and one needs order in order to change it.” (Merleau-Ponty 20)

Socrates’ vision of obedience does not entail simply standing by or blindly following the laws put forth by the authority. Rather, it is a means to make change within society.

Socrates’ apparent contradiction with himself can be thought of as a simple misunderstanding of the terms he used in his arguments. Though he promoted dissent his entire life, he maintained that one must only rebel out of total respect for the law.

We can also attempt to explicate what Socrates and King thought about laws, in order to better understand the tension present in both of their arguments. In the writings of both Socrates and Martin Luther King Jr., two types of laws are described, just and unjust. In his letter from the Birmingham Jail, King said that

“The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that ‘an unjust law is no law at all.’” (King)

King did not condone or “advocate evading or defying the law,” because “That would lead to anarchy” (King). In *The Apology*, Socrates offers a speech in defense of his acts. He states first that Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon were not telling the truth, “On the other hand, scarcely a word of what they said was true” (Plato 17a). He accused them of using “flowery language.” Socrates condemns his accusers by saying that they “have said little or nothing that is true” (Plato 17b). Even though he is steadfast in his conviction that his accusers have lied, he believes it is his duty to prove them wrong: “I must obey the law and make my defence” (Plato 19a). The discord present in Socrates’ arguments in *The Republic* and *The Apology* and in the *Crito* can also be credited to the fact that Socrates believed in two types of laws, just and unjust ones.

There is tension between Socrates’ arguments in *The Apology*, where he expresses his radical views about reforming society, and the *Crito*, where Socrates shows his love for the law and his faith in the beliefs of the state. Socrates’ opinions are closely related to those of Martin Luther King Jr., who, during the Civil Rights movement, led protests and sit-ins, but when arrested and put in jail, showed his belief

in negotiation. I attempted to justify this tension and contradiction by looking at what Socrates and King both thought of obedience and the law. King believed in two types of laws, just and unjust, and Socrates believed that full justice requires obedience. This explanation only touches the surface. Did Socrates actually intend to contradict himself? Was Socrates' mind and were his thoughts as lucid as they appear in Plato's interpretations?

## Works Cited

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