

Do No Harm: Questioning the Socratic Model

Plato's account of the trial and death of Socrates presents two contradictory positions. In *Apology*, Socrates defends himself and addresses the charges against him by questioning the merits of his accusers and argues that he is no guiltier than the institutions of Athens. However in *Crito* when Socrates is given the opportunity to escape and avoid his death sentence he chooses to accept his fate at the hands of the state. In *Apology* he advocates questioning the norms and institutions of the state, but in *Crito* he passively accepts the ruling of the state without question even though it means his demise. Why does Socrates seem to contradict himself? The difference between these positions ultimately contributes to Plato's understanding of political obligation. While members of society have the obligation to question the status quo and authority of the state, they are also obligated to abide by the laws of the state. As a basis for contemporary citizenship this understanding of political obligation holds true to a certain extent, but examples such as the civil rights movement in the United States and the struggle against apartheid in South Africa suggest there are instances when citizens have no choice but to operate outside of the law in order to achieve just ends.

During the trial Socrates defends his actions by elaborating his motives and systemic investigation into the Oracle at Delphi's riddle. Socrates' friend Chaerephon asked the Oracle if there was any man wiser than Socrates, to which she replied "there is none wiser" (*Apology*, 21). Socrates treated this as a riddle and attempted to refute the oracle by finding a wiser man. During his investigation Socrates questioned those who were acclaimed to be "wise" and admits he knew that his imposition upon others made him unpopular, but he believed it was his duty to "go to all those who had any reputation for knowledge and examine its meaning" (*Apology*, 21). Socrates examined poets, politicians and craftsmen as they were considered among the wisest. Overall he finds that "those who had the highest reputation were the most deficient, while those

who were thought to be inferior were more knowledgeable” (*Apology*, 22). Socrates’ harsh criticism of poets, politicians and craftsmen made it easy for them to dislike him and ultimately become his accusers and executioners. They accuse him of corrupting Athens’ youth but when Socrates asked them what he teaches to corrupt them, “[his accusers] were silent, as they did not know, but, so as not to appear at a loss, they mention those accusations that are available against all philosophers, about...not believing in the gods” (*Apology*, 24). Here in lie the two charges against Socrates. 1) Corrupting the youth and 2) not believing in the gods. But the roots of this indictment lie in Socrates’ practice of questioning those in power. The poets, politicians and craftsmen all wield power based on their perceived knowledge. Once that knowledge is questioned, the status quo of the system is challenged.

After Socrates is found guilty and sentenced to death he maintains his defense and condemns his accusers for their wickedness. The apex of the trial has passed and Socrates is now aware of his fate. He warns the jurymen, “There will be more people to test you...you are wrong if you believe that by killing people you will prevent anyone from reproaching you for not living the right way” (*Apology*, 40). The concept of more people testing the norms of society attests to Socrates’ role in establishing a political obligation that encourages the public to question the authority of the state.

While Socrates seemed to provide a logical defense to the charges brought against him, he was still sentenced to death. Though his defense advocated the political obligation of citizens to be active and question the decisions and norms within society, Socrates does not retaliate against the sentence handed down by the Athenian jurymen. Even though he does not agree with the verdict in the slightest, he does not reject it. Socrates’ friend Crito visits him in his prison cell and claims he would be able to orchestrate an escape, but Socrates dismisses this idea. Crito

believes it is unjust for Socrates to give up his life when he has the opportunity to save it (*Crito*, 46). He identifies Socrates' contradictory behavior stating, "you seem to choose the easiest path, whereas one should choose the path a good and courageous man would choose, particularly when one claims throughout one's life to care for virtue" (*Crito*, 46). Socrates addresses Crito by assessing whether or not it would be just to try to escape even though he has not been acquitted. The two come to the conclusion that "one should never do wrong in return, nor do any man harm, no matter what he may have done to you" (*Crito*, 50). Based on this logic, Socrates views his sentence as a just agreement between the city of Athens and himself. If he were to disobey this agreement he would be doing harm to the laws, institutions and city as a whole and "one should never do harm." Therefore, Socrates accepts death because he recognizes that while it is important to question the norms of society, it is equally important to operate within its confines in order to ensure the future of society. If Socrates were to escape, he would be undermining the entire justice system and causing harm to the future of Athens. Thus he rationalizes that it is his obligation to question norms while abiding by the parameters of the law.

Although Socrates appears to outline a universal rule in *Crito*, this is not the case. Socrates believes that "one should never do wrong in return, nor do any man harm, no matter what he may have done" (*Crito*, 50). When this philosophy is combined with Plato's understanding of political obligation, it can be inferred that any type of popular movement that employs means outside of the law should be considered doing harm to another and is thus unjust. The problem with this philosophy is that it fails to address those who have been neglected and denied access to the institutions of the state in the first place. These groups may have no choice but to act outside of the confines of the law in order to gain access. Two twentieth century

examples of this situation are the civil rights movement in the United States (1955-1968) and the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa (1950-1994).

Dr. Martin Luther King's direct action campaign would be considered unjust according to Plato's understanding of political obligation. Dr. King addressed his critics and defended his actions in a letter from a prison in Birmingham, Alabama. His critics believed that it would be more appropriate to pursue negotiations rather than employ a direct action campaign that utilized sit-ins, marches and boycotts. In response Dr. King claimed: "Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue" (King, Jr., 1963). In his letter, Dr. King described his frustration with groups and individuals who claimed to stand for equality but turned him away and told him to "wait" for the right moment for the movement. While Dr. King waited, African Americans continued to be degraded, humiliated and lynched. "The word "wait" [rang] in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant never" (King Jr., 1963).

Though Dr. King was a leader among a group that was marginalized and denied access to basic institutions in the United States, he still operated within the parameters of the law during the beginning of the movement. While he favored negotiations, the community refused to address the grievances of the group and continued to plunder their civil liberties. When waiting ceased to be a viable option direct action was. The sit-ins, marches and boycotts that comprised the direct action campaign violated laws, but it is undeniable that these laws were unjust. Dr. King believed in the moral responsibility of disobeying unjust laws. He quotes St. Augustine in his letter from Birmingham prison stating, "An unjust law is no law at all" (King Jr., 1963).

Likewise, Nelson Mandela's employment of violence in the struggle against the Apartheid regime in South Africa would also be considered unjust according to Plato's understanding of political obligation. However, it must be made clear that Mandela did not initially resort to violence. In fact he and other fighters in the struggle were determined to avoid violence at all costs. In his trial speech from Rivonia, Pretoria Mandela claims "The African National Congress (ANC) was formed in 1912 to defend the rights of the African people...and had adhered strictly to a constitutional struggle for thirty-seven years" (Mandela, 1964). He describes how the ANC put forward multiple demands and resolutions and sent delegations to the government believing that the grievances of Africans could be settled peacefully. While Mandela "waited," he watched as Africans lost more rights under institutionalized Apartheid. He waited patiently for a peaceful agreement while Africans were denied, degraded, humiliated and necklaced. When Mandela could no longer "wait," he and others formed Umkhonto we Sizwe ("Spear of the Nation") because all lawful modes of expressing opposition to white supremacy had been closed by the legislation under Apartheid. Umkhonto's campaign of sabotage specifically targeted structures of the state in an effort to force the government to address grievances they previously refused to discuss. Like Dr. King's direct action campaign, this measure was implemented after operating within the parameters of the law had failed.

Overall, the difference in Socrates' position in *Apology* and *Crito* describes Plato's understanding of political obligation. While members of society have the obligation to question the status quo and authority of the state, they are also obligated to abide by the laws of the state. As a basis for contemporary citizenship, this understanding may provide a good model, but it fails to address those who have been neglected and denied access to the institutions of the state. Groups that must resort to means outside of the parameters of the law in order to gain access to

the institutions of the state cannot be considered unjust. As in the aforementioned examples, both Dr. King and Nelson Mandela exhausted diplomatic means and were forced to resort to means outside the law in order to achieve just ends.

Works Cited

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