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### Plato vs. Martin Luther King Jr.

In this paper, I will argue that Martin Luther King Jr. was right in his belief that unjust laws must be resisted through civil disobedience. Throughout history, the philosophical question of whether one should ever disobey the law has been a topic of significant debate. Both the ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, and the American activist, Martin Luther King Jr., address this philosophical question of whether or not it is moral to disobey unjust laws. On one hand, Plato argues in *Crito* that one must always obey the law, even when they know they are being unjustly charged. On the other hand, Martin Luther King Jr. argues in *Letter from Birmingham Jail* that one must resist unjust laws through civil disobedience. I believe that Martin Luther King Jr. is correct because laws are simply a man-made construct that are humanity's best attempt at a moral constitution, but are often flawed and constantly being revised to adapt to changing times. In this essay, I will compare and contrast these perspectives, drawing from *Crito* and *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, and argue that Martin Luther King Jr.'s view is ultimately the correct answer.

In *Crito*, Socrates, who has been sentenced to death, refuses his friend Crito's offer to escape from prison, despite having been unjustly sentenced to death. He argues that he has a duty to obey the laws of Athens because he has benefited from them greatly throughout his entire life. He sees the social contract as binding; if one disagrees with the law, they should try to change it through legal means, but never by disobeying it. Socrates argues that breaking the law, even in response to an unjust verdict, would undermine the authority of the legal system as a whole.

Socrates personifies the Laws of Athens, imagining them as speaking to him and asking, “Do you think you have a right to retaliation against us, your country and its laws?” (Plato, *Crito*). Instead of escaping, Socrates asserts that one must either work within the legal system to change unjust laws or accept their consequences. Socrates’s stance is further supported in the *Apology*, where he states that he would rather follow divine law than human law if the two were to come into conflict. However, even in this instance, he accepts the legal punishment of the state rather than rebelling against it. This demonstrates his unwavering belief in the legal system, even when it works against him.

While I agree with Socrates that the law is designed for the greater good of humanity—to protect and uphold justice for the people—I cannot ignore the harsh reality that laws are often abused to gain power and used as tools of oppression. Ideally, legal systems are designed to establish order, safeguard individual rights, and ensure fairness for all members of society. However, history has repeatedly shown that those in positions of authority have manipulated these systems to serve their own interests rather than uphold the principles of justice. Rulers, politicians, and those with wealth and influence have frequently bent the law to silence dissenting voices, suppress opposition, and maintain their grip on power. In many, those in power have manipulated legal systems to serve their own interests, silencing dissent, exploiting the vulnerable, and maintaining control rather than ensuring fairness. What is meant to safeguard society can, in the wrong hands, become a weapon of subjugation, proving that justice is not always blind but often swayed by those who wield authority. This troubling reality raises important questions about the true nature of justice and whether laws, as they currently exist, genuinely serve the people or merely act as instruments of control for the privileged few.

This was the case for Martin Luther King Jr.'s protest for civil rights during the 1960s. At the time, America was plagued by a great crisis of racial inequality in which white Americans had weaponized the law to oppress black African Americans. Oppressive regulations like the Jim Crow laws institutionalized segregation, prohibited interracial marriage, and systematically disenfranchised Black Americans. Are laws generally a good thing? Yes. But were they good in the case of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s? Definitely not. Which is why I agree with Martin Luther King Jr.'s decision to disobey laws civilly. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. recognized that laws, while generally made to uphold justice, were not inherently just. Especially when they were designed to enforce discrimination and strip fundamental human rights. In such a corrupt legal system, obedience meant complicity in injustice.

After being arrested for protesting segregation, Martin Luther King Jr. defends his decision to break the law in *Letter From Birmingham Jail* and explains why doing so was necessary. Martin Luther King Jr. defines a just law as one that aligns with moral law and uplifts human dignity, while an unjust law is one that degrades and oppresses people. This aspect of Martin Luther King Jr.'s argument is exactly what leads me to agree with Martin Luther King Jr., as I strongly believe that laws are not inherently just, and some may be unjust and immoral. He continues to reference historical examples, such as the Nazi regime, to illustrate that legality does not necessarily equate to morality. "We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was 'legal' and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was 'illegal'" (King, *Letter from Birmingham Jail*). For Martin Luther King Jr., the mere existence of a law is not enough to justify obedience. Rather, laws must be measured against a higher standard of justice. He also references historical and religious figures such as Jesus, Socrates,

and the American revolutionaries, all of whom challenged unjust systems. Therefore, Martin Luther King Jr.'s choice to engage in civil disobedience was not just justified, but necessary, as it challenged the legitimacy of unjust laws and paved the way for a more equitable society.

While both Plato and Martin Luther King Jr. both discuss the role of law in society, their opinions focus on fundamentally different priorities. Socrates prioritizes social stability and the integrity of the legal system, believing that obeying the law is essential for maintaining social order. He believes that if individuals pick and choose which laws to obey, society will descend into chaos. On the other hand, Martin Luther King Jr. advocates justice over order. He acknowledges that order is important but argues that maintaining order is not worth the cost of injustice. For Martin Luther King Jr., laws must be challenged when they perpetuate injustice, especially when legal methods for change are ineffective. Unlike Socrates, who believes one must obey even unjust laws, Martin Luther King Jr. asserts that moral law takes precedence over human law when the two conflict.

Despite the fundamental differences in the approaches to the philosophical question of disobedience, the two arguments also share many similarities. Both figures share a deep respect for the law, with Socrates opting to accept his death sentence and Martin Luther King Jr. retaliating against the law through non-violent civil disobedience. Furthermore, both acknowledge that breaking the law has consequences. Socrates willingly accepts his death sentence, believing it is just to follow the legal system he has benefited from. Martin Luther King Jr. too accepts imprisonment, arguing that civil disobedience must be nonviolent and accept punishment to expose injustice. Ultimately, both thinkers assert that laws must align with higher moral principles and that individuals must act with integrity when confronting injustice. These overlapping views are ones that I strongly agree with and lead me to not completely dissent

Plato's views. When it comes to refuting the law, one must do so civilly. Only through careful deliberation and civil, nonviolent voicing of opinion will one be able to make an imprint on the law and history forever. These overlapping views strongly resonate with me and lead me to not completely dissent Plato's views. When challenging the law, one must do so civilly, as only through careful deliberation and nonviolent expression can one leave a lasting impact on the law and furthermore, history.

Ultimately, I agree with Martin Luther King Jr.'s argument because it acknowledges that laws are human constructs which are often fallible. Laws were made by humanity to capture the morals that we are inherently born with and create a written set of rules that reflect these morals as best as possible. However, laws will always be flawed and require revision over time. While Plato's view ensures social stability, it assumes that legal structures are inherently just, which history has often proven to be false. The segregation laws of the 1950s, though legally binding, were morally incorrect. Without civil disobedience, I believe that these laws would have persisted much longer. Therefore, while lawbreaking should not be taken lightly, disobedience is sometimes the only choice that will lead to real change. To conclude, while both perspectives offer valuable insights, I agree with Martin Luther King Jr.'s argument which I believe better addresses real-world injustices. Laws must serve justice, and when they fail, nonviolent civil disobedience is necessary to correct them.

### Works Cited

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