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King’s Apology: Reading the “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” as a Modern Version of the Socratic Speech

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Abstract
Although Martin Luther King Jr. is rarely acknowledged as a philosopher, he and Socrates share some strong philosophical views. They were both committed to a higher power and were sincerely concerned with not only the well being of their societies, but also the spiritual and moral health of the individual. King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” and Socrates’ speech in the Apology share a similar structure, and they use many of the same strategies. Both are defenses against the accusations from the clergy of Birmingham and the citizens of Athens, respectively. These defenses use similar strategies not just to prove the innocence of these great men, but also to turn the charges against their accusers. In doing so, King and Socrates suggest that there is a true and a false understanding of the idea in question (e.g. what it means to be an extremist). Most importantly, this essay reveals King’s sincere concern for the moral and spiritual well-being of the individual. The process of analyzing and comprehending King’s and Socrates philosophical views reveals why they used civil disobedience, rather than violence, as a tool to promote social progress.

Key Terms:
• Martin Luther King
• Socrates
• Moral Well-being
• Spiritual Well-being
History has been altered through the actions of great men who refused to be overtaken by the lack of integrity and the injustice that plagued their society. Socrates and Martin Luther King Jr. are historically renowned as civilly disobedient leaders. Socrates is admired for his persistent pursuit of truth. King is acknowledged for being a spiritual leader who promoted equality for all people through nonviolence. These great men are frequently compared to one another, especially since King himself draws a connection between his form of civil disobedience and Socrates’ version.

While Socrates and King are regarded as prominent pioneers of civil disobedience, they share other strong philosophical views that are, unfortunately, often ignored. Scholars and the general public typically focus on Plato’s *Crito* in order to discuss Socrates’ civil disobedience. When they do mention Plato’s *Apology*, they tend to emphasize the popular image of the gadfly. Both of these comparisons stress the social consequences of Plato’s and Socrates actions of these great men, but a closer reading shows that they were equally concerned with the moral and spiritual well-being of the individual. Unlike other works of scholarship that compare Martin Luther King Jr. and Socrates, this paper uses Socrates’ speech in Plato’s *Apology* to help acknowledge King as not only a civilly disobedient leader, but also as a philosopher. King’s literary contributions and social activism are supported by an underlying philosophy that injustice distorts the individual’s personality and self-identity.

As a preacher in Montgomery, Alabama, King knew firsthand the effects of segregation on the African American community, and he was determined to help African-Americans and other minorities make social progress. After noting several methods used to combat civil injustice, he concluded, “Nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon which cuts without wounding and ennobles the man who wields it. It is a sword that heals” (“Nobel”). On August 28, 1963, King delivered his “I Have A Dream” speech. He spoke of equality, opportunity, and perseverance. King became the voice of hope for a society that had struggled for 500 years with racism. As a powerful speaker, he was able to reassure the oppressed community that social progress would come in the near future, and as he prophesized, in 1954, segregation was ruled unconstitutional. Although African-Americans continued to suffer from discrimination, the progress King so vividly described during his “I Have A Dream” speech was slowly unfolding.

King’s acts of civil disobedience are undoubtedly noteworthy. However, his philosophical views are just as interesting but less acknowledged. King agreed that segregation was immoral and that reacting violently would not solve this problem, but he also believed that segregation corroded the individual’s personality and identity. Although segregation elevated those in power, it embedded a feeling of unworthiness and self-hatred into the oppressed.

Socrates is recognized for being an influential philosopher as well as a disciplined and civilly disobedient leader. In Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates stated his concern for the effects of the Athenians’ lackadaisical behavior. He noted that they lacked the curiosity to examine their assumptions. This is why they mistakenly praised the wisdom of politicians, craftsmen, and poets without questioning their credibility. On the contrary, Socrates questioned those that claimed to be wise to awaken their sense of self-awareness. He was eventually accused of being an atheist and a corruptor of the youth, sentenced to trial, and found guilty. Sequentially, in Plato’s *Crito*, Socrates willingly submits to staying in prison while his friend, Crito, tries to persuade him to flee. Socrates argues that by fleeing he would be committing a more offensive crime against his
state, family, and conscience. Earlier in the *Apology*, Socrates mentions a voice that deters him from committing wrongdoings, and in the *Crito*, Socrates tells his friend that he is content and does not have the urge to flee. Ultimately, Socrates accepts his punishment, although he had been wrongfully accused.

Having outlined the basic approaches of King and Socrates, it is now necessary to explore the strong philosophical connections that are too frequently overlooked. King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” and Socrates’ *Apology* serve as defenses against the accusations from the clergy of Birmingham and the citizens of Athens, respectively. These defenses share similar structures and strategies. I will argue that both Socrates and King turn the charges against their accusers for the sake of distinguishing between a true and a false understanding of the ideas in question, which were negotiation and wisdom. Finally, I will suggest that they adopt these strategies out of concern for the moral and spiritual well-being of the individual.

Initially, Socrates and King attempt to defend themselves by denying the accusations from the citizens of Athens and the clergy of Birmingham. For instance, Socrates is accused of being an atheist and a corruptor of the youth. He argues that it is impossible to believe in divine activity without believing in gods, and if he was a corruptor of the youth, their families would have promoted his prosecution (Plato 38). However, his protégés and their families were present to support him during the trial (Plato 39). Similarly, King’s reaction to the violence in Alabama was viewed as untimely by members of the clergy. Yet he believed that his actions could not have been more punctual. He asserted, “Justice delayed was justice denied” (“Letter”). Like Socrates, King viewed himself as a gadfly. He states, “Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood” (“Letter”). He concluded that African-Americans would not move up the social ladder without the assistance of immediate nonviolent direct action.

After denying the accusations, both Socrates and King manipulated and reversed the accusations on their accusers. Socrates not only believed that he was not harming the city, but he also believed that he was the gods’ gift to Athens. He assured the Athenian jury that by prosecuting him they would be harming the city. He claimed that without him, Athenians would not be encouraged to question the morality of their actions, nor would they be concerned with their spiritual well being. Similarly, King abandoned the negative connotation of being an extremist and devised a more optimistic interpretation. He admits, “I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label” (“Letter”). After reminiscing on great historical figures such as Jesus, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln, King noted that although they supported love and justice, they were also considered to be extremists. King concluded that maybe he was the type of extremist the South needed to initiate change.

By reversing the accusations, King and Socrates showed how seemingly simple ideas are actually complex. For instance, the clergy of Birmingham preferred negotiation rather than King’s tactics of nonviolent direct action. However, King believed that negotiation would be meaningless unless both parties could, at least potentially, reap benefits from the agreement. He writes, “Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue” (“Letter”). Before the
nonviolent protest, African-American leaders would attempt to negotiate with Birmingham’s leaders to decrease the amount of racial discrimination and violence. Many of the agreements made during the ‘negotiations’ were not kept or were kept for only a short period of time. King notes, “As the weeks and months went by, we realized that we were the victims of a broken promise. A few signs, briefly removed, returned; the others remained” (“Letter”). Fruitful negotiation had not taken place because only one party had power. Thus, King viewed nonviolent protest as an instrument that would create better opportunities for fair negotiation. As a result, King’s affiliates launched protests, sit-ins and marches, which crippled Birmingham’s economy. For the first time, the city’s leaders were force to negotiate fairly with the African-American community. This shows that the clergy had a false sense of what it means to negotiate.

King continued by challenging the clergy’s idea of what it meant to be moderate. King contended that “The shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will” (“Letter”). He reasoned that the clergy’s behavior was, in a sense, worse than the Ku Klux Klan’s because of their indecisiveness. The Ku Klux Klan’s behavior was decisive and predictable; whereas the clergy’s actions were bewildering because they recognized the problem and chose not to do anything. Their inaction allowed segregation to become deeply rooted within southern society in such a way that it had become commonly accepted as a norm. Consequently, segregation became more difficult to defeat.

King held that the clergy were the true extremists, and he was the true moderate. He thought of himself as, “...stand(ing) in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community” (“Letter”). King identified these two forces as the “do nothingism of the complacent” and Black Nationalist (“Letter”). After years of fighting for their rights, lower class African-Americans had become complacent, and King referred to their behavior as “do nothingism”:

“One is a force of complacency, made up in part of Negroes who, as a result of long years of oppression, are so drained of self respect and a sense of ‘somebodiness’ that they have adjusted to segregation; and in part of a few middle-class Negroes who, because of a degree of academic and economic security and because in some ways they profit by segregation, have become insensitive to the problems of the masses” (“Letter”).

King also criticized the Black Nationalist groups. They were highly inclined to use violence as a tool to fight for civil rights and equality. King viewed his organization as the medium of the two because they were neither complacent nor radical. His organization’s approach sought to raise awareness of the African American community’s concern without harming anyone (Powers 41).

King insisted that even the idea of nonviolence is complex. During the protest, Birmingham police officers were praised by the community for being nonviolent towards protestors, but King did not believe their display of discipline was praiseworthy. King stated that the Birmingham police officers were preserving the evil system of segregation. He concluded that, “It is just as wrong, or perhaps even more so, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends” (“Letter”). On the contrary, King’s nonviolent approach aimed to create a just society. He criticized the white moderate, who is more devoted to “order” than to justice and who prefers a negative peace, which is absence of tension, to a positive peace, which is the presence of justice (“Letter”). King believed that law, order and justice were equally dependent upon one another. King stated, “I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the
purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress” (“Letter”).

King and Socrates had more complex interpretations of various ideas because they shared similar skeptical attitudes. For instance, in *Euthyphro*, Socrates questions Euthyphro’s interpretation of piety. Socrates instructed Euthyphro to identify the one characteristic that all holy deeds had in common. If Euthyphro understood the idea of holiness, he would have responded correctly, but unfortunately, every answer he gave was either an example or not a complete definition. Ultimately, it became clear that Euthyphro did not understand holiness. In Euthyphro’s opinion, the idea of holiness was obvious, but Socrates proved it was not. Socrates’ skepticism not only forced Euthyphro to re-examine his actions and beliefs, also gave Euthyphro the opportunity not to be mislead to believe that holiness could be obtained by simply pleasing the gods. In Euthyphro, Euthyphro states, “Pious is what all the gods love, and opposite, what all the gods hate, is the impious” (Plato 11). This is misleading because Socrates later points out that the gods have opposing views.

Similarly to King, Socrates was also mistaken to be as an extremist, but he, in fact, acted as a moderate. Socrates represented the median between the Athenians, who preferred not to question their beliefs, and the sophists, who questioned everything and made a business out of teaching others to be persuasive. Unlike his peers, Socrates’ value for wisdom and spiritual well-being motivated him to seek truth and to question the actions of others as well as his own. He was mistaken for being a sophist, but unlike the sophists, he helped others without expecting any monetary awards for his deeds. Furthermore, Socrates was motivated by his pursuit of truth. Unlike the Sophist, Socrates cared less about persuasion and more about placing special emphasis on taking care of one’s soul.

King and Socrates viewed themselves as healthy alternatives to the true extremists in their societies. King warned that failure to support his nonviolence approach would lead to more racial turmoil promoted by the Black Nationalist groups:

...And I am further convinced that if our white brothers dismiss as “‘rabble rousers’” and “‘outside agitators’” those of us who employ nonviolent direct action, and if they refuse to support our nonviolent efforts, millions of Negroes will, out of frustration and despair, seek solace and security in black nationalist ideologies--a development that would inevitably lead to a frightening racial nightmare (“Letter”).

Likewise, Socrates warned of the consequence the city would face after prosecuting him. He states, “I say gentlemen, to those who voted to kill me, a vengeance will come upon you immediately after my death much harder to bear than that which you took in killing me” (Plato 42). He told the jury that if he were convicted, then the city would become overwhelmed with young sophists, who did not desire to acquire wisdom (Plato 42). Unlike the true extremists they were being compared to, King and Socrates valued higher ideas that guided their actions. For instance, King dreamed of social equality and global peace, while Socrates had a passion for wisdom, seeking the truth, and maintaining one’s spiritual and moral well-being.

King and Socrates had a shared belief in a “higher law.” King defined this law as one that upheld morality and justice, and Socrates announced to the Athenian jury his obedience to a divine law. In “A letter from a Birmingham Jail,” King states that, “I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of
the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.” In the Apology Socrates states, “Men of Athens I am grateful and I am your friends but I will obey the gods rather than you...”(Plato 34). They both believed that their “higher law” was superior to all other doctrines, and they relied on their conscience to decide whether their actions were just. King defends his action by arguing that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willing accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law (“Letter”). King suggested that conscience could motivate one to disobey a law (“Letter”). In the Apology Socrates refers to his daimon, which is a voice that prevents him from making poor decisions (Narcy 113).

King’s and Socrates’ abilities to derive different interpretations of various ideas could mean there is a true and false understanding of these ideas. Still, although it is commonly accepted that King and Socrates were morally right, there is no way in general to prove that listening to one’s conscience is better than following the law. Unlike the law, one’s conscience is subject to change depending upon the individual, and it is a private standard for which one cannot produce tangible proof that his or her actions are just. Conversely, the law is a public standard that is officially documented and is administered to all citizens. Nonetheless, there is reasonable doubt that the clergy of Birmingham and the Athenian jury were wrong for persecuting King and Socrates, respectively. Recall that the clergy of Birmingham were wrong for praising the police officers for displaying discipline when handling the protestors. In addition, the clergy of Birmingham believed that segregation would dwindle from existence with time, but King refuted by stating, “We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights” (“Letter”). He argued that segregation would not fade from existence in the future if it had not happened within the previous 340 years. Similarly, as we learn in the Apology, Athenians were wrong for praising politicians, poets and craftsmen for being wise. In both cases, the city’s men had poor judgment because they were reacting with a shallow understanding of nonviolence, social progress, and wisdom.

Unlike the citizens of their societies, King and Socrates were truly decisive because they had a deeper understanding of these seemingly simple ideas. One would expect that King and Socrates would be confused after recognizing that there is a true and false understanding of a given idea, such as negotiation and wisdom, but, surprisingly, they are decisive and courageous men. It was risky for King to travel from Atlanta to Birmingham to assist in the civil rights movement. Yet, King felt it was necessary because he argued “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (“Letter”). Correspondingly, in the Apology, Socrates held that “wherever a man has taken a position that he believes to be best, there he shall remain and face danger” (Plato 33). As philosophers, King and Socrates acknowledged different perspectives of a given idea, and their ability to select from more than one point of view made them truly decisive. Conversely, their accusers did not see the complexity of these ideas, so unlike King and Socrates, they were blind to the different possibilities. Therefore, their accusers could not have been truly decisive because decisiveness calls for one to see various possibilities and select one. However, King and Socrates’ accusers simply followed the status quo. For example, King’s accusers claimed that they supported the law, but when segregation was ruled unconstitutional, they did not abide by the new regulations. Hence, they were not supporters of the law, but they were merely in favor of the laws that supported segregation. King represented an individual who truly supported the law and not simply the entrenched power and privileges it fostered.
These courageous actions are not only motivated by King’s and Socrates’ concern for their society’s social health, but more so by their concern for the individual’s spiritual and moral well being. King is renowned for being a civil rights leader, but he was originally a religious leader. He was aware of the social consequences of segregation, but he was even more bothered by the damage segregation had on one’s personality and identity. He expresses his concern through an image of little girl that wanted to go to Fun Town, but could not because of her race (“Letter”). King depicted the anguish, confusion, hatred and feeling of rejection that slowly consumed this little girl. Segregation was immoral because, as in the case of this little girl, it belittled the African American community sense of self-worth. King further displays his concern by including self-purification as an integral part of the nonviolent campaign. Likewise, Socrates questioned the Athenians because he wanted them to share his appreciation for acquiring the truth. He famously held that “the unexamined life was not worth living” (Plato 41). Socrates wanted to encourage the Athenians to question their actions and beliefs for the sake of arriving to the truth on their own.

If one only focuses on King’s and Socrates’ civil disobedience, the other important philosophical views they share would go unnoticed. King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” and Socrates’ Apology first appear as simple defenses. However, when compared to one another they express King’s and Socrates’ deeper understanding of law and their value for the spiritual and moral well being of the individual. Martin Luther King Jr. and Socrates are great and courageous men, and their acts of civil disobedience are praiseworthy. Still, we must encourage ourselves to delve deeper than the highly discussed accomplishments of these men to gain a better understanding of what made them truly great, and in doing so we gain a greater appreciation for their social contributions.

Works Cited


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