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Civil Disobedience

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Introduction

People employ different strategies to protest unjust laws. Some laws are seen as effective while others contribute to anarchy. There have been many discussions over which form of civil disobedience works best. This paper discusses three forms of civil disobedience and then proposes one that is the most effective. The first part of the paper reviews the three different positions regarding civil disobedience. Then the second part of the paper shows that non-violent direct action is the most effective means of protest. Non-violent direct action is the most effective; apart from employing persuasion, it goes further to promote negotiation with the aim of finding a solution that creates solidarity.

Critical Review of Possible Positions

a. Socrates and Persuasion

Socrates proposes persuasion as the most effective means of civil disobedience. Civil disobedience is a means of protesting against an unjust law. It is a way of pressing for an unjust law to be changed so that it does not violate the rights of human beings. Socrates proposes persuasion as an effective means of civil disobedience, because it is pursued within the confines of law and order (Plato, n.d.). Socrates observes that the possibility of justice rests on law and order (Plato, n.d.). Pressing for a change of an unjust law should be carried out within the established laws of the state, even if they are unfair. When one finds himself in a state that has unjust laws, they have no option but to adhere to the laws. Adhering to the state laws will prevent the cause of harm to other people (Kahn, 1998). Breaking the law, no matter how unjust the law

is, is itself an unjust deed. Consequently, people need to pursue justice within the premises of the already established state laws.

The most effective means of changing the attitude of those who do injustice is to seek a change of behavior through the act of persuasion. Persuasion serves as the most effective means of seeking justice, because it allows reason to prevail. According to Socrates, reason preserves the existence of the state (Plato, n.d.). The state is very important, because it allows for the creation of families and provision of education. Being truant to the state laws is an act that will encourage anarchy and ruin the state (Plato, n.d.). However, pursuing justice through persuasion upholds the existence of a state while a solution to injustice is established. On the contrary, breaking of the laws will lead to a state of disorder, an environment that will not favor the pursuance of justice. The pursuit of justice through the creation of lawlessness and disorderliness makes justice unachievable (Kahn, 1998). A state of disorder will result in more people being harmed leading to a generation breakdown.

Persuasion is an effective way of pursuing justice, as it demonstrates the power of reasoning as an alternative to power of physical force. Reasoning does not cause any harm to the state as opposed to the use of physical force. Besides, reasoning does not force the state to change the unjust laws but allows it to have a proper insight of the laws being protested against. The change of laws through the act of reasoning solves the problem permanently, as the state will have established the ills of laws. The use of physical force, on the other hand, is a temporary solution, because it does not result in a complete change of attitudes.

Socrates views breaking of the law as an ineffective means of pursuing justice, because it threatens the existence of law and order. Socrates argues that the existence of law and order is

what distinguishes a civilized state from a barbaric one (Plato, n.d.). Consequently, pursuing justice through violent means makes the people who are fighting for a just cause to appear barbaric. It also does not restore justice that is being sought, but creates a state of lawlessness and disorderliness. The pursuance of justice results in harm in large amounts. Socrates advocates that individuals' actions should bring the least amount of harm.

b. Dr. King and Non-Violence Direct Action

Dr. King advocated non-violent means of pursuing justice. King's mode of civil disobedience is effective, because not only does it liberate the black people from oppression, but also it promotes solidarity, a sense of responsibility, and respect for all people regardless of their race or ethnicity. King's method, consequently, offers the best method of solving the differences that exist between whites and blacks. Solidarity will allow people of all races to co-exist peacefully governed by the same laws. Non-violent means allow people to view each other as human beings with no boundaries of inferiority or superiority (Hobby, 2010). It is a means that restores human dignity to the blacks who are segregated. Rather than further entrench hatred and animosity, non-violent means unite people with differences. This is because it is not driven by the heart for revenge but rather by bringing the ills in the society to the fore. The end result of non-violent direct action is the transformation of hostility into an understanding that breeds solidarity.

Non-violent direct action promotes negotiation. Non-violent means helps bring both parties into the negotiation table thanks to the constructive tension that it creates (King, 1963). For both persuasion and negotiation to succeed, people must be willing to listen. However, people might have deep-rooted opinions and prejudices that prevent them from listening to each

other. Through non-violent direct action, the oppressed people can force their oppressors to give their privileged positions and listen to them. The purpose of non-violent direct action is to bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive so that it can be seen and dealt with.

Non-violent direct action is a demonstration of high morals, integrity, and deserving respect that should be afforded to everyone. According to King, the use of violent means degrades a person (King, 1963). Therefore, the use of non-violent means demonstrates to oppressors the value of human beings. Oppressors get to understand that it is unworthy to use violence against fellow human beings. The use of non-violent direct action reveals the human personality. People should be treated in a respectable manner that upholds their dignity (Hobby, 2010). Violence in the form of slavery or segregation, therefore, devalues the dignity of human beings.

Dr King is opposed to persuasion, because it seeks to promote order and stability at the expense of justice. The method of persuasion places order and peace above justice. To King, the peace that exists in such a situation is negative peace. King further argues that law and order should exist as the tools of pursuing justice rather than as the inhibitors of the flow of social progress (King, 1963).

Persuasion is a less effective means, because it is a slow process that does not guarantee results. Socrates advocates for infinite patience. King is against Socrates' opinion, because a social change does not occur on its own. It must be instituted by human action (King, 1963). Consequently, being patient while waiting for a revolution to occur will be the same as furthering social injustices that are taking place.

Dr. King is also opposed to Malcolm X method of violence. Violence promotes animosity and breeds hatred instead of bringing peace. Violence is destructive to nature that human beings depend on. The destructive tension created distracts people from pursuing their goals and leads to the aggravation of social and racial inequality.

Violence is less effective, because it degrades and treats people in a lesser way. King is opposed to using violence because it compromises the values of a person. Consequently, one should avoid using violence to pursue justice, even if the other party is using violence against them.

c. Malcolm X

Malcolm X advocates the use of any means necessary as a way of civil disobedience. He stands for the use of violence for the pursuit of justice. The use of violence demonstrates to others that the pursuit for an end to oppression will take anything. It demonstrates a sense of self-respect. People who have self-respect do not allow themselves to be treated with disrespectfulness. According to Malcolm X, the use of violence will send a message that one has a stand, which must be respected (Malcolm X, n.d.).

The use of violence is effective, because it deters oppressors from conducting the acts of injustices. Malcolm X strongly advocates for revenge, because it serves as a form of justice in itself (Malcolm X, n.d.). Violence allows for a reciprocal death. When one is treated with non-violence, then they also display non-violence and vice versa. The use of violence prevents other parties from using further violence.

Violence is an effective means of civil disobedience, because it has been in use for a long time, and it has always worked. Malcolm X observes that revolutions are bloody. He further observes that America's Revolution against the British colonialists used violence for it to be effective (Malcolm X, n.d.).

Malcolm X is against Socrates persuasion method, because it emphasizes patience. Social changes have time scales, which give no room for patience. When one is faced with a form of injustice, they are supposed to act immediately instead of waiting for history (Novak, 2006). Persuasion is aimed at changing the attitude of people, which is sometimes impossible due to strong prejudices and stereotypes. Malcolm X observes that American conscience is already corrupt; hence, it cannot be changed by persuasion (Malcolm X, n.d.).

Malcolm X is also against the use of non-violent direct action, because it fails to distinguish an individual as a personality or as a self-respecting human being. Violence, on the other hand, asserts the principles of human dignity. A person should be willing to die rather than live a life of oppression. Non-violence encourages the integration and solidarity with oppressors. Malcolm X sees this as the integration into a system that is full of injustice and oppression (Malcolm X, n.d.). Consequently, non-violence only serves to further oppression instead of preventing it.

Non-violence as the Best Form of Civil Disobedience

Non-violence method offers the best form of civil disobedience among the three methods. It seeks to create understanding and solidarity rather than further division from the oppressors. King emphasizes that any form of injustice in any place in America affects the entire American

society (King, 1963). Non-violence encourages participation of every person regardless of race or color. The key goal of non-violent direct action is to make the perpetrators of injustices understand that all human beings are equal. The result of the method is the integration of all people into the same society with equal human dignity.

Non-violence recognizes the vulnerability of the human mind to stereotypes and prejudices; hence, it encourages the process that forces oppressors to have an insight into the forms of injustice. King notes that it is difficult to persuade and negotiate, if one party does not see the injustices to be corrected (King, 1963). Non-violent direct action brings to the fore the forms of injustices for them to be acted upon. The process of non-violence, therefore, encourages reasoning and education.

Non-violent direct action method maintains law and order while opposing the unjust laws. Unlike the method of Malcolm X, which encourages open violation of the laws, non-violent methods address injustices in a diplomatic way through its four-stage process where facts of existence of injustice are established and addressed through negotiation, self-purification, and lastly direct action. Direct action is the last resort in the non-violent method. It encompasses Socrates' method of persuasion while ignoring Malcolm X's call for violence. Non-violent direct action method is, consequently, a hybrid product of the Socrates' method and Malcolm X method; hence, it is very effective.

Objections may, however, be raised concerning non-violent direct action as a process that ignores the existing laws of the state in order to champion its own laws and order. It can also be objected to as an ineffective method, since it stimulates the occurrence of violence.

Non-violence respects all the just laws and orders of the state. It only seeks a platform to encourage the reforms of the unjust laws. It does this by collecting facts about injustices then calls for negotiation. Direct action is only a means of bringing the other side to the negotiating table. Besides, non-violence demonstrators are ready to bear the consequences for any broken laws and acts of disorderliness. The laws being protested against are unjust laws; hence, they cannot be broken. The objection that non-violence encourages violence does not hold water, since the main goal of demonstrators is not to attract violence but to encourage negotiation. It is oppressors who respond by violence to peaceful protestors. Non-violent direct action is, therefore, a peaceful method that does not create any lawlessness or disorderliness.

Conclusion

Civil disobedience is meant to protest against unjust laws or any forms of injustices that downgrade human dignity. The three forms discussed, persuasion, non-violent direct action, and any means necessary, have their advantages and disadvantages. Persuasion encourages the upholding of law and order, non-violent direct action uses non-violent methods to encourage negotiation, while “any means necessary” encourages violence. Non-violent direct action is the most effective method, since it embraces persuasion and promotes negotiation with the aim of creating understanding and solidarity.

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