

This is a sample of a Rogerian Argument, an assignment often done in ENC1102.

Russell _____

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To Obey or Not to Obey

Once again it is election time in America—another chance for the average American to voice his or her opinion on what direction the country should take in the next four years. Casting a vote, John Q. Taxpayer gets a voice in determining how some of his money will be spent, which issues will take priority and which will get pushed aside until the next election year. But what if choosing another president is not enough? What if John Q. Taxpayer believes his government is corrupt and defies his moral principles, for example, because it condones abortion or capital punishment? What actions can he take? He could write a letter to his senator or even to the president himself. Or he could organize a protest outside of the White House with speeches condemning the government, marches disrupting traffic on Pennsylvania Avenue, and a mock ceremony shredding the American flag. Would this street protest constitute civil disobedience? And if so, is it justifiable? When, if ever, is it morally defensible to break a law?

To answer these questions about civil disobedience, one must first answer another question: What role should government play in limiting or controlling personal choice? How far any particular individual is willing to push the limits of the law depends largely upon his or her feelings of loyalty and patriotism to the nation. One who holds the ideas of loyalty and

patriotism in the highest regard is less willing to upset the order of his government. In an excerpt from Plato's *Crito*, written over two thousand years ago, Socrates, a citizen of Athens, explains

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his view that citizens are forever indebted to their nation. Speaking on behalf of the Athenian government, Socrates asks Crito, "Well then, since you were brought into the world and nurtured and educated by us, can you deny in the first place that you are our child and slave, as your fathers were before you?" (Plato 664). This question clearly indicates Socrates's firm belief that the individual is beholden to the state as the child is to the parent; he owes nothing less than his life to the state. Therefore, one has no alternative but to obey the laws of his nation. Socrates continues,

Has a philosopher like you failed to discover that our country is more to be valued and higher and holier far than mother or father or any ancestor.... And when we are punished by her, whether with imprisonment or stripes, the punishment is to be endured in silence, and if she leads us to wounds or death in battle, thither we follow as is right; ... (Plato 664)

In Socrates's opinion, obedience to the state should dictate one's behavior and actions.

If a citizen considers a law to unjust or the government corrupt, according to Socrates, one should attempt to convince the leaders to change the law and, thus, to remedy the flaw. If, however, the individual is unsuccessful in having the laws changed, then one can choose to relocate to another country. But if one rejects this option and chooses to remain in the country, he must submit to the laws as they stand, even when he considers them unjust. So if one disapproves of a law, he or she must obey it because the state's (or government's) authority is supreme. Socrates proclaims, "He who has experience in the manner in which we order justice

and administer the state, and still remains, has entered into an implied contract that he will do as we command him” (Plato 664-5). So, if one disapproves of a law, he must obey it so long as he

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chooses to remain a citizen of that state. Socrates himself took this ethical principle to the extreme. In choosing to remain in Athens, he accepts the rule of law, which has declared him guilty of “corrupting the youth” (a trumped-up charge to silence forever his voice of dissenting viewpoints) and sentenced him to death. Clearly, he values the rule of law over his individual life, even if the “rule” is flawed.

On the other hand, the 19th-century American, Henry David Thoreau, stands in direct opposition to Socrates’s viewpoint. Thoreau places the authority of the individual above that of the government. In his argument “Civil Disobedience,” Thoreau contends that the government exists solely to serve the people. Instead of the citizens’ being loyal to the government, the government should be loyal to its citizens. Thoreau suggests that the government’s role in the everyday lives of citizens should be limited to an absolute minimum: “That government is best which governs not at all; Government is at best but an expedient;” (Thoreau 676). Thoreau makes it clear that he is not a supporter of strong national government; in fact, he rebukes it as a not so necessary evil. Moreover, he specifically challenges the ideas of persons (such as Socrates) who believe in obeying laws deemed unjust until such time as the laws can be amended:

Unjust laws exist: Shall we be content to obey them, [and] endeavor to amend them, . . . or shall we disobey them at once: Men generally . . . think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them. They think that, if they should resist, the remedy would be worse than the evil. But it is the

fault of the government itself that the remedy is worse than the evil. *It makes it worse.* (682)

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Here Thoreau suggests that the government is to blame for any violence that might occur in revolution. He shows signs of a strong will and limited patience. Later, Thoreau states, “As for adopting the ways which the State has provided for remedying the evil, I know not of such ways. They take too much time, and a man’s life will be gone” (683). The individual, according to Thoreau, is more effective and efficient than the State in addressing problems of evil and corruption.

However, Thoreau does not appear to advocate violence in any form. Instead he suggests a more passive approach to resistance: “What I have to do is to see that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn” (683). Thoreau himself refused to pay a poll tax that would fund the United States’s war on Mexico in 1848, which in his opinion, constituted an unjust act of aggression. For his refusal to pay the tax, Thoreau spent one night in jail—not a news-breaking incident, but his example gives credence to his willingness to break the law and to accept his punishment in order to make his disapproval known. In Thoreau’s view, the State or government should be the servant of the individual citizen; the individual is the supreme authority. Thoreau surely is a champion of thinking for oneself.

Both Socrates and Thoreau offer persuasive arguments for their opposing positions on the value of civil disobedience—the authority of the government and its laws versus the authority of the individual and his or her moral conscience. Socrates believes that citizens owe their government unequivocal loyalty and must obey its laws, even those they deem unfair or

immoral. Thoreau, on the contrary, believes that citizens should not tolerate injustice or moral failings in their government and should act to rectify the situation, even if it means breaking the

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law. Given the merit of both arguments, how should Jane Q. Citizen respond to a law she considers to be unjust or immoral?

Although Socrates and Thoreau advocate opposing positions, they share essential common ground: both men believe that the individual is directly responsible for addressing and responding to the laws of one's country. Above all, they both believe that the individual must acknowledge and accept the consequences of his or her response to the laws—whether that action is one of obedience or disobedience. And finally, each individual must determine what he or she is willing to do to bring about a fair and just government. When an individual disapproves of a government's rule of law, whether one chooses to lobby one's senator or to chain him or herself to the White House fence is an individual decision. Both Socrates and Thoreau would agree that the only wrong action is no action.

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