

Phil 1504: Final Paper

Is it ever morally permissible for full citizens to break the law? (“Full citizens” = residents who are not deprived of any rights or privileges of citizenship in the state.) Socrates in the *Crito*, and Martin Luther King, Jr. in *Letter from Birmingham Jail* can be seen as offering competing answers to this question. Socrates argues that it is NEVER permissible for full citizens to violate the law. But according to Dr. King, it is not only morally permissible, but morally obligatory to break *unjust* laws.

In an essay of no more than five pages (double-spaced, normal font, normal margins, no extra line breaks between paragraphs), discuss whether King’s view would undercut Socrates’ argument, thus allowing Socrates to escape. Please be sure to consider both sides of the issue. More precisely, I would like you to write a paper with the following four parts:

- (1) After introducing the basic question, please *reconstruct* Socrates’ Primary Argument against his escape from prison. Make sure to explain separately any statements in your reconstruction which need explaining.
- (2) Next, explain how MLK’s distinction between just and unjust laws might weaken Socrates’ argument. Be sure you explain MLK’s distinction *carefully and in detail* in your discussion.
- (3) Then, offer the *strongest reply* that Socrates could give to the objection outlined in (2). In this part of the paper, I do NOT want you to merely repeat Socrates’ argument from part (1), but rather *identify a defect in the objection* from (2).
- (4) End with some arguments about whether the reply in (3) is successful. Specifically:
 - If you think the reply is NOT successful, please explain why. Again, do not merely repeat the initial objection, but rather identify a *defect in the reply* from (3)
 - On the other hand, if you think the reply in (3) *is* successful, then (i) consider a complaint that *someone else* might have about it, and (ii) show how that complaint is unwarranted.

Note: This is NOT a research paper. In fact I *discourage* the use of secondary sources for this class, as they can often be more confusing than enlightening.

Let me emphasize that this is not a “book report” type paper. Rather, I want you to present philosophical issue *for the purpose of critically evaluating it*. Accordingly, I take parts (3) and (4) to be the *most important* parts of your paper, so I would expect them to be longer than just a paragraph or two. In particular, part (4) should be the culmination of your discussion, rather than just a few brief, closing remarks.

Don't be disheartened if you find sections (3) and (4) particularly difficult. I'm asking you to come up with your *own arguments* which requires a bit of ingenuity and thought on your part. I'm *not* asking for *decisive* arguments; in fact, the best philosophical papers are typically those that can argue both sides of an issue, and consequently often fail to come up with a conclusive, categorical answer. I'm just looking to see that you can critically engage the issue *on your own*. (But of course, I'm here to help if you are having trouble.) Consequently, I'm not grading you on the answer you give, but on the *reasoning* you deploy when discussing the issue. (Look again at the handouts on arguments and argument fallacies, to remind yourself what makes for good reasoning.)

On Scholar, I've also posted a handout "Advice on Writing" which you should also find helpful.

The final draft is **due on May 9th at 5:25pm** in the lecture room. Early submissions appreciated—inquire with your GTA.

Final bit of advice: Be clear. Be as clear as the morning air. Be as crystal clear as a mountain stream in the springtime when the snow is melting and the saplings are budding. Clear.