

Philosophy Group November Report by Annie Clouston

This month we considered the philosophers and practitioners of Civil Disobedience

Definition: Civil disobedience, also called **passive resistance**, is the refusal to obey the demands or commands of a government or occupying power, without resorting to violence or active measures of opposition; its usual purpose is to force concessions from the government or occupying power. Civil disobedience has been a major tactic and philosophy of nationalist movements in Africa and India, in the American civil rights movement, and of labour, anti-war, and other social movements, notably XR at the present time, in many countries.

Civil disobedience is a symbolic or ritualistic violation of the law rather than a rejection of the system as a whole. The civil disobedient, finding legitimate avenues of change blocked or non-existent, feels obligated by a higher, extra-legal principle to break some specific law. It is because acts associated with civil disobedience are considered crimes, however, and known by actor and public alike to be punishable, that such acts serve as a protest. By submitting to punishment, the civil disobedient hopes to set a moral example that will provoke the majority or the government into effecting meaningful political, social, or economic change. Under the imperative of setting a moral example, leaders of civil disobedience insist that the illegal actions be nonviolent.

Philosophers:

The philosophical roots of civil disobedience lie deep in Western thought: Cicero (106BC-43BC), Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), John Locke(1632-1704), Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) all sought to justify conduct by virtue of its harmony with some antecedent superhuman moral law.

Practitioners: Two examples

Martin Luther King

Inspired as a student by Thoreau.

“One of the great glories of democracy,” King remarked at the outset of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, “is the right to protest for right.” King’s awareness of the power of civil disobedience as a protest method quickened in the course of his first nonviolent direct-action campaign, the Montgomery bus boycott, and developed further as he reflected on the sit-in movement initiated by black college students

in early 1960. It reached its full fruition in the Birmingham campaign in the spring of 1963, which occasioned his most extended and influential reflection on the subject. In April 1963 he marched to a Birmingham Jail cell and was imprisoned. From there he wrote the "***Letter from Birmingham Jail***" in which he defended himself on the grounds of the right reasons, the right spirit and the right people.

Mohandas Gandhi

On March 12, 1930, Gandhi (1869-1948) began a defiant march to the sea in protest of the British monopoly on salt, his boldest act of civil disobedience yet against British rule in India. Britain's Salt Acts prohibited Indians from collecting or selling salt, a staple in the Indian diet. Citizens were forced to buy the vital mineral from the British, who, in addition to exercising a monopoly over the manufacture and sale of salt, also exerted a heavy salt tax. Defying the Salt Acts, Gandhi reasoned, would be an ingeniously simple way for many Indians to break a British law non-violently. Resistance to British salt policies was to be the unifying theme for his new campaign of *satyagraha*, or mass civil disobedience.

Ghandi set out from Sabarmati with 78 followers on a 241-mile march to the coastal town of Dandi on the Arabian Sea to defy British policy by making salt from seawater. An increasing number of people joined the satyagraha. At Dandi he was at the head of a crowd of tens of thousands. Here, he walked down to the sea to make salt, but the police forestalled him by crushing the salt deposits into the mud. Nevertheless, Gandhi picked up a small lump of natural salt out of the mud and thousands more followed his lead. In the coastal cities of Bombay and Karachi, Indian nationalists led crowds of citizens in making salt. British law had been defied. Civil disobedience broke out all across India, soon involving millions of Indians, and British authorities arrested more than 60,000 people. Gandhi himself was arrested on May 5, but the satyagraha continued without him.

Next meeting:

Tuesday 28th January at Penny's at 10am. ***Doing the right thing?***
With reference to the philosopher Michael Sandell in his book ***Justice, what's the right thing to do?***