DR. KING’S
LETTER FROM A BIRMINGHAM JAIL

THE SOCRATIC INFLUENCE
LIKE SOCRATES, KING FINDS HIMSELF IN JAIL FOR
SIMPLY BEING A “GADFLY”

From The Euthyphro
The Socratic Method: Dialogue; the
Relationship between “law” &
“the Good”

From The Apology
The “Gadfly” and the Social Task of
Ending Complacency, the enemy of
Social Change

A QUICK LESSON IN LOGIC
Universal Truth in Physics

"You deplore the demonstrations taking place in
Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say,
fails to express a similar concern for the conditions
that brought about the demonstrations. I am sure
that none of you would want to rest content with
the superficial kind of social analysis that deals
merely with effects and does not grapple with
underlying causes. It is unfortunate that
demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but
it is even more unfortunate that the city’s white
power structure left the Negro community with
no alternative.”

A QUICK LESSON IN LOGIC
King’s Point:

DO NO HARM

Socrates: “never do harm willingly”

King: “We began a series of workshops
on nonviolence, and we repeatedly
asked ourselves: “Are you able to
accept blows without retaliating?” “Are
you able to endure the ordeal of jail?”

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King’s Point:
'Sup, Socrates?!
Guess what? I know what JUSTICE is!

Okay. What IS the definition of "Justice" then?

The definition of justice is to do whatever the law tells me.

Nope. And here are the reasons why that won't work...

The definition of justice is to do whatever the law tells me.

Wait... but... but... I thought...
Where did I get that definition of "justice"?

TENSION OF THE MIND!
TENSION

“You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks to dramatize the issue that a community no longer can ignore. My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension."

TENSION – THE ROLE OF THE GADFLY

“I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth, 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 unfortified 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."

DIALOGUE VS. MONOLOGUE

“The purpose of our direct action program is to create a situation so crisis packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. I therefore concur with you in your call for negotiation. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue.”

DIALOGUE VS. MONOLOGUE

Monologue

The Authority

Believe what we tell you to believe, act as we tell you to act, think as we tell you to think, and all will be well!

Dialogue

“Let’s figure this out by working together and sharing our ideas!”

NEVER BREAK THE “LAW”

King: “This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court’s decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, at first glance it may seem rather paradoxical for us consciously to break laws. One may well ask: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust.

JUST VS. UNJUST LAWS

Just Laws

I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws.

Unjust Laws

“Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "an unjust law is no law at all."”
JUST VS. UNJUST LAWS

### Just Laws
- The Good
- What the Authority Loves
- Laws

### Unjust Laws
- The Good
- What the Authority Loves
- Laws

THE DEFINITION OF “PIETY” (THE “GOOD”)

King: (1) “Any law that uplifts human personality is just”

(2) “A just law is a code that a power majority compels a power minority to follow that it is willing to follow itself” (this is “sameness made legal”)

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THE DEFINITION OF “IMPIETY” (THE “BAD”)

King: (1) “Any law that degrades human dignity is unjust”

(2) “An unjust is a code that a power majority group compels a power minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself.” (this is “difference made legal.”)

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POWER MAJORITY VS. REGULAR MAJORITY

The Power Majority in America is…
POWER MAJORITY VS. POWER MINORITY

CONSIDER SOME EXAMPLES

(1) “Any law that degrades human dignity is unjust”
(2) “An unjust is a code that a power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself” (this is “difference made legal”)