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Introduction to the Classical Political Thought Essays

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Introduction to the Classical Political Thought Essays

INTRODUCTION TO THE CLASSICAL POLITICAL THOUGHT ESSAYS

These essays were selected by Professor Simeone as the three best essays for one of the assignments in last fall's theory class. Students in the theory classes work on their persuasive essay writing skills. The claim-objection-rejoinder format requires students to state their views with economy and precision. Students vote for the best essay; the winner receives the coveted "Certificate of Merit." The majority in the fall section chose Sara Ghadiri's essay. Which would you choose?

The full title of the class is Classical Political Thought: Democracy in Athens and America. The class has multiple goals; it fulfills both the department's theory requirement and an "intellectual traditions" general education category. On the political science side, this class needs to introduce students to the important debate over the drivers of state behavior among realists, constructivists, and liberal institutionalists. On the general education side, the class is intended to introduce students to the great texts of classical political thought and the key questions that prompted those texts. These goals are addressed in part by reading Thucydides' masterwork, *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Thucydides forces students to consider whether just wars exist and the role of rhetoric in democratic societies.

The class also reads Sophocles, Plato, Aristophanes, and Aristotle. Plato's *Crito* provides the essay contest question: under what conditions are democratic dissenters, i.e., those who disobey the law of a limited government, justified?

Socrates makes at least three arguments in the *Crito* for why he ought to obey the jury sentence against him: (1) because one ought "to fulfill all one's agreements, provided they are just" (49e); (2) because disobedience destroys "the Laws, and the whole state as well" (50b); and (3) because one is "even more bound to respect ... your country" than one's father (51b).

Richard Kraut believes that despite these arguments, Socrates' view does allow for a measure of civil disobedience such as the philosopher displayed in the *Apology*. This is because Socrates also argues that "you must do what your city and your country commands, or else persuade it that justice is on your side" (51c). The addition of the persuasion option creates an opening for dialogue and civil disobedience. But how wide is this opening for civil disobedience, and what principles justify it?

To provide more specificity, we turn to the different answers to this question offered by Americans Abe Fortas and Howard Zinn. For Fortas the opening is very narrow because only invalid and unconstitutional laws should be disobeyed, proper dissent is limited to breaking only these laws, and dissenters must accept the punishment that comes even with breaking unjust laws. Kimberley Brownlee calls this a "deference to the law" approach. Zinn argues that both parts of Fortas' deference view – the limit on proper disobedience and the requirement of accepting state punishment – are fallacious.

Students were asked to write an essay giving reasons for holding that either Fortas or Zinn has the more defensible position.