

Socrates on the Moral Authority of the State

“The object of this analysis is the philosophical work of Socrates titled Crito. The author offers some compelling arguments about the moral authority of the state. It might seem inconsistent with another basic statement of the philosopher in the same work as well as some other points in the Apology. I would like to argue that even though these arguments are somehow interrelated, the critical evolution of the moral authority of the state can plausibly be explained in such a way as to exclude any real inconsistency with other points of view on this topic.

A reader can find the initial striking argument at 51b of the Crito. The author claims that the state’s citizens are its servants as the state provides them with a sense of safety, education, and other social benefits. That is why Socrates offers that the population is subordinate of the state and its regulations: in case a citizen disagrees with some of the local laws, they should “either persuade it or obey its orders," no matter whether it is safe or not. In the Apology, the main character accepts the fact of his death sentence based on these judgments of the author. Thus, there is a connection between the claims of these two works.

Another similar argument pops up several paragraphs later, in 51e and 52 respectively. The philosopher argues that a citizen is like signing the contract with the state to remain part of its society by obeying all the laws. This time, Socrates does not insist on the fact that the state is always right and the citizen cannot try to reject the dogma. The author admits that if a citizen convinces the state of their truth, they may avoid the law. It sounds this way ”either persuade us or do what we say" (52a). If the person fails to prove their point of view, it may result in the severest punishment, including death.

As previously said, these points of the philosopher tend to contradict with each other as, in the second case, Socrates mentions that one can refuse the state’s laws by proving a personal position. At the same time, both claims stress the dominant position of the state, making citizens almost the slaves. They can, however, try to defend their position if they believe the state is acting in a wrong manner. The main idea is that the author’s claim that a citizen must never do wrong sounds inconsistent with his belief that a citizen must always obey the final orders of the state.

I still think, however, that one can read the critical paragraphs about the state’s

authority in the Crito in a way to render them consistent with the philosopher's exhortation never act wrong as well as his remarks concerning disobedience in another work. To understand this, one should distinguish between two issues: (a) what the state might require a citizen to do, and (b) what the state might require a citizen to endure. With this in mind, the claims of Socrates can be interpreted in absolutely different ways.