

The Place of Plato's *Crito* in American Political Discourse¹

Plato's Socratic dialogues originated in places foreign to the experiences of students, yet many topics that Socrates discussed with Athenian citizens and others are relevant in today's classroom. Selecting additional works to study with Platonic dialogues is an opportunity to fashion a loose dialogue between authors. This effort engages students in discussions that can span centuries. Plato's *Crito*,² Abraham Lincoln's "Lyceum Address,"³ and Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail"⁴ are three works that include the themes of law and justice. Their different approaches and particular circumstances enrich the inquiry and extend it in unexpected ways. After a summary of the arguments in the *Crito*, I discuss law, justice, and persuasion in the three works and conclude by addressing the broader topic of human action.

The Crito

The *Crito* is set in a jail cell in Athens in 399 BC. It is the dialogue that follows Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, the account of Socrates's trial, guilty verdict, and death sentence. The dialogue begins with Socrates asking Crito why he has come to his cell before daybreak. He tells him that the death sentence is soon to be executed. This message, which Crito says will not be hard for Socrates, is one that he will bear "the most gravely of all."⁵ The death sentence to Crito means the loss of his friend. The conversation is between the two of them, but when Crito can no longer respond to Socrates's questions, the laws and the community of the city continue the dialogue.

Crito gives several reasons to Socrates to convince him to flee, beginning with his being deprived of such a companion as he would never discover again. He also speaks of his reputation in the eyes of the many. He assures Socrates that if he were to leave, he and his friends would suffer no ill consequences and calls it just for them to save him. He adds that modest bribes

would suffice, friends were at hand to assist, and many cities outside of Athens would welcome him.

He invokes justice when he claims that Socrates's decision to stay is not just, that he is betraying himself and his sons, and is hastening his accusers' efforts to ruin him. He makes the astonishing claim that Socrates is choosing "the most easygoing course"⁶ should he stay. This choice, he argues, is in contrast with the standard of choosing what is good and manly and adds "particularly if one has claimed to care for virtue through his whole life."⁷ Rather than continuing to speak of virtue, he speaks of a "ridiculous conclusion of the affair" and "a certain badness and lack of manliness on our part,"⁸ thus closing as he began, by emphasizing how this judgment reflects on him.

Socrates is willing to consider Crito's pleas whether to stay or flee, not by obeying him but through reasoned arguments. He does not allow his friendship with Crito to lead him to disregard arguments that he had previously made to fellow citizens and at his trial. His response to Crito is in three parts: the opinions of the many, whether it is just to leave, and honoring one's agreements with others.

Socrates makes two distinctions to cast doubt on heeding the many: the upright opinions held by the prudent are contrasted with the villainous opinions held by the imprudent and the one with expertise (e.g. the doctor) is contrasted with the lack of knowledge of the many. He explains that one risks suffering evil and being corrupted by listening to wrong or bad opinions or following those of the many. He asks Crito, "is life worth living for us when it has been corrupted?"⁹ This question expands the scope of the discussion and goes beyond that of simply obeying the verdict or fleeing. Crito agrees with Socrates that it is not living but living well that is most important.

Socrates uses the standard of justice to address whether it is just for him to flee.

Regarding Crito's offer of paying money or gratitude to those who would help him flee, he asks whether it would be just or unjust to do such things. If the latter, then he must stay. He invokes measures of good and noble or bad and shameful to judge whether behavior is just or unjust. He prefaches his next question—whether injustice ought not to be done voluntarily or injustice be done in one way but not in another—with a reference to a beginning. Although the dialogue is past the midpoint, one can infer that the previous responses to Crito's points were preliminary and that this question begins Socrates's argument. They agree that one must in no way do injustice. The volley of questions continues and concludes with Socrates's summary of this “beginning,” which includes that it is never correct to do injustice, to do injustice in return, or for someone to whom evil is done to defend himself by doing evil in return. Crito agrees.

Socrates next asks whether one should “do the things he agrees upon with someone—if they are just—or ought he to evade them by deception.”¹⁰ Crito responds that one ought to do them. Socrates's initial concern had been to persuade Crito, but he expands the scope to include persuading the city. He explains that if they do not persuade the city, they will be doing evil to some. He again asks, should we abide by the things we agreed to if they are just or not? Crito has no answer and says that he does not understand. Socrates asks his friend, “what if the laws and the community of the city should come and stand before us who are about to run away (or whatever name we should give it) from here and ask: ‘Tell me, Socrates, what do you have in mind to do?’”¹¹ There is a decided change in tone at this point in the dialogue. The friendly exchange between two friends—one anxious that his friend is about to die and the other concerned that his friend understand the reasons why he must accept the verdict—ends when the

Laws¹² pepper Socrates with questions about his intended actions and the ensuing consequences.

It is as though a second trial were commencing with both Socrates and the Laws on trial.

There are three parts to the exchange with the Laws: the first claim (or charge) voiced by the Laws is the most extreme consequence should Socrates flee, that he is destroying the laws and the city; the second part is that such an action would be labeled unjust because he has agreed in deed to be governed in accordance with the laws, having stayed in Athens despite being free to leave; the third part is the consequences that Socrates, his companions, and his children would suffer should he flee.

Socrates invites Crito to join in responding to the first charge made against him—that he is destroying the laws and the city—by asking him whether judgments reached in trials are authoritative or can be deemed unjust and therefore do not need to be followed. Consistent with what he had said previously, Crito thinks that the city is being unjust. The Laws return to the prospect of Socrates destroying them should he flee, by asking whether he had agreed to abide by whichever judgment the city reached in trial. The basis for this agreement is the laws begetting, nurturing, and educating Socrates. Such a relationship is like that of a parent, which does not lend itself to parity. The child does not respond in kind to the punishment of the parent, just as the guilty one sentenced to die does not respond in kind by destroying the laws and the city. Consistent with the suggestion that this is a second trial, the Laws allow for persuading the city should one differ from doing what the city bids. The authoritative stance adopted by the Laws is thus moderated in this allowance for argument and debate and is similar to what would take place in a trial or political setting. The Laws repeat this call for persuasion but with an addition: “persuade it [the city] what the just is by nature.”¹³ The reference to nature is significant because it removes the arguments used to persuade from the personal realm, as Crito

does at the beginning of the dialogue, to a more universal standard. It is thus more comprehensive.

The second and third arguments of the Laws relate to Socrates having chosen to spend his life in Athens and what his life would be should he choose to flee to another city. His staying is an agreement to be governed by and abide by the Laws. He did not propose exile as a punishment at his trial, but if he flees after the verdict, he would transgress the laws and others would look upon him as a corruptor of the laws and youths. This would confirm that those who judged him guilty were correct. The Laws ask, “will life be worth living for you?”¹⁴ They give a dismal portrayal of his life outside of Athens and remark that he would not give speeches about virtue and justice in other cities, nor would his speeches have further import for Athenians.

The Laws speak of another trial (the first being Socrates before the Athenians and the second before the Laws) after his death: “when you go to Hades you will have all these things to say in your defense before those who rule there.”¹⁵ The Laws are referring to the arguments that they have made to Socrates not to flee. Should Crito persuade him, the Laws in Hades would not receive him favorably. The last plea made to Socrates by the Laws is to obey them, his nurturers. Socrates concludes his exchange with the Laws telling Crito, “these things are what I seem to hear.”¹⁶ Crito has nothing more to say. The next dialogue in succession, the *Phaedo*, relates the conversation between Socrates and others on the immortality of the soul in the final hours of his life, before the jailer brings him the hemlock.

The Crito and American Political Discourse

The *Crito* is among the shortest of the Platonic dialogues. The starkly contrasting views of Crito and the Laws draw readers into discussions about law and justice in a community. The content and brevity of Lincoln’s “Lyceum Address” and King’s “Letter” lend themselves well to

this inquiry as do Lincoln's and King's regard for law and justice and their rightful and necessary applications in communities. Lincoln praises the American "political edifice of liberty and equal rights" and recognizes that "if destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher."¹⁷ The immediate threats that he addresses are mobs and the dangers they pose for ignoring the rule of law. King, in his April 16, 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail," written in response to the letter from four days earlier by a group of clergymen who called King's activities "unwise and untimely,"¹⁸ explains that the Birmingham affiliate of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference requested that he engage in a nonviolent direct-action program. More broadly, he explains, it is injustice in Birmingham that brought him there and adds, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."¹⁹

The works of Lincoln and King encompass the period prior to the Civil War and the era when civil rights were at the forefront of political debates. The 125-year span (1838-1963)—the dates of the "Lyceum Address" and the "Letter"—was a period when the nation faced the increasing divide between the presence or rejection of slavery and the continuing effects of discrimination and deprivation of rights. Lincoln does not expressly discuss slavery in the "Lyceum Address," but his regard, also shared by King, for the founding documents referenced in the "Lyceum Address" informed his position that took shape and directed his subsequent actions. The standard of justice that they recognize is a measure of law in any community, regardless of the century or country. A discussion of the topics of law, justice, and persuasion will address similarities and differences between these three men and their writings.

Law

The three make ancestral and familial references in their writings with respect to law, but their use and significance differ. The topics range from parents and the laws forming the

character of the citizens, supporting an attachment to the community, and forging bonds with the American community and its founding. Each author has a unique portrayal that fosters discussion.

The Laws in the *Crito* establish a fundamental association between laws and citizens by combining the natural activity of families with the conventions and practices of political regimes. “We begat, nourished [nurtured], and educated you [Socrates], and gave you and all the other citizens a share in all the noble things.”²⁰ Although the Laws place greater emphasis on their role—“didn’t we beget you, and didn’t your father take your mother and bring you forth through us?”²¹—the acknowledgment of the natural activity is present, albeit within the framework of the laws. Socrates does not refute or challenge this unusual characterization. Nature and convention are usually opposed in classical Greek thought, but joining the natural activity of parents and the conventional activity of law with respect to nurturing and educating can be understood in this context as both contributing to forming the character of citizens. Laws achieve this in the public setting of the city and parents do so in the private realm of the household. The Laws’ reference to the share in all noble things makes the effort to form good character take on greater importance because it supports achieving higher aspirations.

Socrates may not have objected to the Laws’ characterization because he also encouraged his fellow Athenians to care for virtue. His concern that his fellow citizens did not give thought to prudence, truth, and virtue, as he tells the jurors at his trial, prompted him to persuade them to be virtuous. His concern was twofold: “I attempted to persuade each of you not to care for any of his own things until he cares for himself, how he will be the best and most prudent possible, nor to care for the things of the city until he cares for the city, and so to care for the other things in the same way.”²² An individual with a virtuous character, one who cares for himself before

caring for any of his own things, also cares for the city by being lawful and just. Socrates completes the natural and conventional activities of nurturing and educating as expressed through familial references, not through habituation as parents and the laws do but through reason.

Lincoln makes several references to family including “legal inheritors,” “a legacy bequeathed us,” “departed race of ancestors,” “gratitude to our fathers,” “a husband, a father, a son or brother, a *living history* was to be found in every family.”²³ These mentions weave a theme of acknowledgement and connection to those who established America’s new political foundation as expressed in the following statement. “As the patriots of seventy-six did to the support of the Declaration of Independence, so to the support of the Constitution and Laws, let every American pledge his life, his property, and his sacred honor;--let every man remember that to violate the law, is to trample on the blood of his father, and to tear the character [charter?] of his own, and his children's liberty.”²⁴ This understanding of the consequences of violating the law with respect to one’s familial connections makes for a stronger attachment to and support for one’s government and laws. Similar to the Laws telling Socrates that he would destroy them should he flee, Lincoln, too, is fighting forces that could alienate the citizens’ attachment to their laws or the threat of one who seeks to gratify his ruling passion by destroying established political institutions. These take the form of mobs who disregard the rule of law, citizens who become disenchanted with their government, or threats from those who are not satisfied with maintaining a government established by others.

Lincoln describes the American government as “a system of political institutions, conduced more essentially to the ends of civil and religious liberty, than any of which the history of former times tells us.”²⁵ His call for maintaining and reinforcing attachment to these

institutions and laws is necessary and worthy, but attachment alone is not sufficient to quell the greater, destructive human passions. Reason must replace the passions: “cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defence, Let those [materials] be moulded into *general intelligence, [sound] morality* and in particular, *a reverence for the constitution and laws.*”²⁶ Calls for reason and morality are comparable to Socrates’s efforts to encourage his fellow citizens to care for themselves and their cities and to use reasoned arguments. With respect to Lincoln’s concerns, the morality of the citizens and their use of reason serve as the new foundations for the “pillars of the temple of liberty”²⁷ in America. His call for reverence is all encompassing: “Let reverence for the Laws, be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap--let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges;--let it be written in Primmers, spelling books, and in Almanacs;--let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice.”²⁸

King speaks of the ugly record of brutality in Birmingham, describing it as the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. He uses familial references to illustrate the lawless mobs that Lincoln feared and the policemen who were responsible for upholding the law: “But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters....”²⁹ Another familial reference expresses a hope for the future that speaks of unity regardless of color: “I have heard numerous southern religious leaders admonish their worshipers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers declare: ‘Follow this decree because integration is morally right and because the Negro is your brother.’”³⁰ The juxtaposition of King’s familial references

is jarring, but King and others were committed to fighting for the Negro community's constitutional and God-given rights. Their hope was within the same founding documents read by Lincoln. Beyond stopping the ugly brutality and discrimination, among the reasons why King and others worked to bring the disinherited children into the fold to become lawful citizens is so that they, too, could be nurtured and educated by laws or speak of legacies and gratitude like Socrates and Lincoln.

Similar to Lincoln, King reaches back to America's founding fathers. "One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judaeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence."³¹ Socrates may not have praised "the great wells of democracy," but the three recognized the role of the *demos*, the people, in establishing, perpetuating, and destroying the laws. This recognition returns us to the character of the citizenry. While the experiences of the three differed significantly, the character of the citizens played a major role in their governments and its laws. Socrates encouraged citizens to be good and just and care for the city before themselves. Lincoln recognized that a people attached to their government and laws supports the founders' proposition that they are capable of self-governance. This attachment is also their defense against threats to the country. The experiences of King and the Negro community of bad governance by unjust citizens moved them to seek better alternatives.

These examples of the familial and ancestral references made by the three men vary dramatically and had different purposes, but their shared human element makes a political

discussion more relevant to those who study their works, regardless of whether they are recent writings or from times long past.

Justice

Justice and injustice are prominent themes in the three works. They serve as standards to judge the behavior and actions of those in the community.

Socrates uses justice as a standard to judge his actions and those of Crito, as explained in the summary above. He does not decide the immediate question of whether to abide by the law or flee by how easily he can escape or find a place to live outside of Athens but whether he is committing a just or unjust act. The Laws distinguish between their arguments and Crito's: "If you depart now, you will depart having been done injustice not by us laws, but by human beings."³² They also emphasize the standard of justice in their final argument: "But, Socrates, obey us [the Laws], your nurturers, and do not regard children or living or anything else as more important than justice."³³

Lincoln describes mobs defying the rule of law and relates his concerns about current and future threats to the country as well as innocent men and women who might suffer from mob violence. He also recognizes the importance of courts of justice enforcing laws and fears for executive ministers of justice in the face of the mobs.

The racial prejudice that King and others in his community suffered resulted from the immoral behavior of some, but he, like Lincoln, had faith in the principles of the founding documents. He worked toward persuading citizens to shed their prejudices and honor the commitment and promise of the founding fathers. King also uses justice to distinguish between just and unjust laws. He speaks in terms of obligation but adds the qualification of justice. "One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws."³⁴ He later adds, "In no sense do

I advocate evading or defying the law, as would the rabid segregationist. That would lead to anarchy.”

Justice also serves as a measure to judge man-made laws. King is precise in his call for obeying just laws but not obey 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.’”³⁵ He explains the difference between the two. “A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law.”³⁶ King, in contrast to Crito who argues to Socrates that the trial and verdict were unjust and wants him to flee during the night, calls for a different approach: “One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.”³⁷

Socrates and Lincoln do not make the same distinction that King makes. Lincoln insists on even bad laws being “religiously observed.”³⁸ Socrates explains to Crito that “even he who has been done injustice, then, must not do injustice in return, as the many suppose, since one must in no way do injustice.”³⁹ To be fair to King, he does not see unjust laws as laws, so disobeying them is not, strictly speaking, doing injustice, but the question is whether King’s refusal to obey an unjust law is at odds with the positions of Socrates and Lincoln. The last topic of persuasion gives an insight into understanding a key difference between the three and answers the question.

Persuasion

The three works are not merely theoretical statements, but they urge those who are the subjects of the writing or those to whom the writing is directed to act. Persuasion is a means to spur action.

The forcefulness of the Laws is apparent from their entrée into the conversation when they tell Socrates that fleeing would destroy the laws and the whole city. In keeping with the suggestion that this is another trial, they propose the alternative of persuasion to Socrates. This provision allows for challenging an accusation or an unjust action or law. The Greek word *peitho* (πειθω) is translated as both persuade and obey. Socrates, Crito, and the Laws use the word in both senses; their uses divide the dialogue into three parts. The beginning of the dialogue, the first part, has only one instance of Crito invoking persuasion when he says that the many will not be persuaded that Socrates was not willing to go away and three instances of his asking Socrates to obey him. Obeying has a sense of submission and is consistent with Crito wanting Socrates to submit to his pleas. Socrates uses the word obey four times in the second part to clarify that he will not submit to Crito, but he will only obey rational and convincing arguments or someone who is knowledgeable. The Laws in the third part use both persuade and obey several times. They call upon Socrates to persuade them that it is just to flee and to recall his obligation to obey them; they conclude with a plea that he be persuaded by them and not Crito. Crito's admission that he has nothing to say suggests that Socrates has persuaded him and that they both must obey the verdict.⁴⁰ During Socrates's trial before the Athenians, he asserts that he defends himself through teaching and persuasion. He defends his actions to Crito while simultaneously teaching him through his arguments why he must not flee.

While Lincoln does not use the word persuasion, his call for repeal of bad (unjust) laws can assume such an action through the persuasion of citizens, voters, or legislators. “When I so pressingly urge a strict observance of all the laws, let me not be understood as saying there are no bad laws, nor that grievances may not arise, for the redress of which, no legal provisions have been made. I mean to say no such thing. But I do mean to say, that, although bad laws, if they exist, should be repealed as soon as possible, still while they continue in force, for the sake of example, they should be religiously observed.”⁴¹ The practice of abiding by all laws prevents citizens from choosing which laws to follow or becoming alienated from them.

King faces a different problem in the South, as he captures in this observation: “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.”⁴² The distinction that King makes between just and unjust laws is a necessary one. He explains how unjust laws persist in the circumstances that he and others were confronting. “An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself. This is *difference* made legal. By the same token, a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow and that it is willing to follow itself. This is *sameness* made legal.”⁴³ King also links justice to law and order. “I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice.”⁴⁴ The white power structure, the white legislative majority, and governing officials were not open to persuasion through speech, nor did they have a goal of establishing justice for all in the community.

King was unable to act as Socrates or Lincoln had acted. They were citizens and had standing in their respective communities to make arguments, whether before a jury, a legislature,

or the people. King and others in the Negro community suffered because they were deprived of legal protections and lacked the standing or stature needed to engage in persuasion. He gives an example: “In the course of the negotiations, certain promises were made by the merchants -- for example, to remove the stores’ humiliating racial signs.... As the weeks and months went by, we realized that we were the victims of a broken promise. A few signs, briefly removed, returned; the others remained.”⁴⁵ The Negro community was outside the broader community. Their protests were aimed in part at becoming citizens who could participate fully in governance and thus have the entrée to engage in dialogue and debate to persuade others to act in good faith. King restates his explanation of an unjust law in political terms: “A law is unjust if it is inflicted on a minority that, as a result of being denied the right to vote, had no part in enacting or devising the law.”⁴⁶ It was not only social interaction and economic opportunity that King and others sought, but also full political participation.

The nonviolent direct-action program that King organized included behaviors such as peaceful marches and sit-ins. Unable to persuade city officials and residents or repeal bad laws through speech, the program was persuasion through action. “Injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.”⁴⁷ He explains how to accomplish this: “My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. Lamentably, it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups tend to be more immoral than individuals.”⁴⁸

This discussion of persuasion through words and actions highlights a stark difference between the three men. The resolution of the seeming contradiction between King's call for disobeying unjust laws and Socrates's and Lincoln's calls for abiding by all laws is the recognition of the unique circumstances of the three men. If Socrates does not accept the verdict, he risks undermining his past efforts in Athens to teach and persuade others to have a concern for virtue and transgressing the principle of not doing injustice in return, regardless of what one suffers from others. Both would harm his fellow citizens and the city. Lincoln's calls to stand firm against the mobs' lawlessness, follow and revere the laws, and change them when necessary redound to the long-term benefit of the country. King's willingness to disobey unjust laws was aimed at ending the practices of denying justice and rights to some, attaining the goal of laws being authoritative for all, and revoking unjust laws that caused suffering in the Negro community.

Horrible Places and Human Action

This essay was part of the Association for Core Texts and Courses panel entitled "Horrible Places and Human Action." The places included the jail cells of Socrates and King. King's "crime" was not having a permit for a public gathering, a gathering intended to promote action against injustice. Socrates's "crimes" were corrupting the youth, not believing in the city's gods, and introducing new ones. The trial allows Socrates to respond to his accusers and those who slandered him, but more importantly he explains what led him to "philosophizing"⁴⁹ and examining himself and others. The venues of mob violence, "from New England to Louisiana"⁵⁰ as recounted by Lincoln, were scenes of horrific crimes that threatened the moral foundation of the people. He prescribes responses to the threats that will only be successful if the citizens play an active role.

Justice no less than injustice is concerned with human action. The actions of the three men varied, but the quest for law and justice unifies them. The Platonic dialogues are philosophical inquiries, but an urgency sets the *Crito* apart from other dialogues because of the emphasis on action: “we should consider whether these things are to be done, or not.”⁵¹ Socrates, Crito, and the Laws clarify through dialogue which actions are consistent with justice. The action in Lincoln’s “Lyceum Address” is directed not to the mob but to his fellow Americans. He calls upon them to engage in the activities of revering the laws and embracing the founding documents as the foundation of the political religion of the nation, of replacing passion with reason to maintain civil and religious liberty, and, as the full title of his “Lyceum Address” conveys, perpetuating our political institutions. King uses the word action numerous times in his “Letter” and speaks of the direct-action program to open the door to advance their cause. The non-violent campaign included a series of actions: “collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action.”⁵² The goal of ending the wait for their constitutional and God-given rights relied upon “strong, persistent and determined action”⁵³ and was key to rooting out the injustices suffered by the Negro community. The actions of the three varied, but dialogue and reasoned debate, a stemming of the passions, reverence for the laws, and application of just laws to all contributed to the pursuit of justice.

The title of this essay is “The Place of Plato’s *Crito* in American Political Discourse.” King’s reference to Socrates in his “Letter” suggests how we can better understand the connection between the dialogue and the two works by Lincoln and King.

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 unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, we must 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.⁵⁴

Dialogue creates the tension in the mind. Through question and answer, participants pursue a search, a quest, whether it be for truth, a direction, or as King says to rise from myths and half-truths. The example of the *Crito* presents Socrates at the heart of a dialogue deliberating about “whether these things are to be done, or not.”⁵⁵ Perhaps the essay is more aptly named “The Place of Socrates in American Political Discourse” but because dialogue is not a solo activity, the issues raised by Crito and the Laws lend themselves to inquiries that are relevant and similar to those raised by Lincoln and King and more broadly those in American political discourse. The full presentation must include others who question and put forth objections. This was true for Socrates who responded to both Crito and the Laws, for King who responded to the clergymen and more broadly his detractors and the American people, and for Lincoln who responded to threats posed by the mobs or others who would threaten the American political order.

King also addresses the danger of not engaging in dialogue. “Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue.”⁵⁶ In America today, we, too, are at risk of falling prey to monologue and must recapture and engage in the dialogues that Plato, Socrates, Lincoln, King, and others transmitted to us. They transcend time and place, combat the tendency to narrow the scope of learning, and serve as introductions to works that are part of a corpus that makes thoughtful human beings.

Notes

1. Prepared for delivery at the Association for Core Texts and Courses Conference, April 2024. This is a revised version of the essay responding to the ACTC 2024 conference theme question, “Why read and teach texts that come from places foreign to the experiences and personal histories of our students?” The panel title was “Horrific Places and Human Action.”
2. Plato, *Four Texts on Socrates: Plato’s Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito and Aristophanes’ Clouds*, trans. Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).
3. Lincoln, “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions,” Address Before the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois on January 27, 1838, in Vol. 1 of *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler et al. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1953). It is commonly referred to as the “Lyceum Address.”
4. King, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in *Why We Can’t Wait* (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 2000).
5. Plato, *Crito* 43c.
6. Plato, *Crito* 45d.
7. Plato, *Crito* 45e.
8. Plato, *Crito* 45e.
9. Plato, *Crito* 47d.
10. Plato, *Crito* 49e.
11. Plato, *Crito* 50a.
12. “Laws” will be capitalized when referring to the personified laws in the *Crito*.
13. Plato, *Crito* 51b.
14. Plato, *Crito* 53c.
15. Plato, *Crito* 54b.
16. Plato, *Crito* 54d.
17. Lincoln, 108, 109.
18. A Group of Clergy Men, “Letter from C.C.J. Carpenter, Joseph A. Durick, et.al. to Local Negroes (1963): Withdraw from Demonstrations,” April 13, 1963. From Teaching American History, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/letter-to-martin-luther-king/>.
19. King, 65.
20. Plato, *Crito* 51b.
21. Plato, *Crito* 50d.
22. Plato, *Four Texts on Socrates: Plato’s Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito and Aristophanes’ Clouds*, trans. Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), *Apology* 36c.

23. Lincoln, 108, 115. The words in italics are in the *Collected Works* edition.
24. Lincoln, 112. The word in brackets is in the *Collected Works* edition.
25. Lincoln, 108.
26. Lincoln, 115. The words in italics and brackets are in the *Collected Works* edition.
27. Lincoln, 115.
28. Lincoln, 112.
29. King, 69.
30. King, 79.
31. King, 83.
32. Plato, *Crito* 54b.
33. Plato, *Crito* 54b.
34. King, 70.
35. King, 70.
36. King, 70.
37. King, 72.
38. Lincoln, 112.
39. Plato, *Crito* 49b.
40. Plato, *Crito* 54d.
41. Lincoln, 112.
42. King, 66.
43. King, 71.
44. King, 73.
45. King, 66.
46. King, 71
47. King, 73.
48. King, 68.
49. Plato, *Apology* 28e.
50. Lincoln, 109.

51. Plato, *Crito* 46b.

52. King, 66.

53. King, 77.

54. King, 67-68.

55. Plato, *Crito* 46b.

56. King, 68.

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