

Book Review

Civil Disobedience: a Philosophical Overview

By Piero Moraro

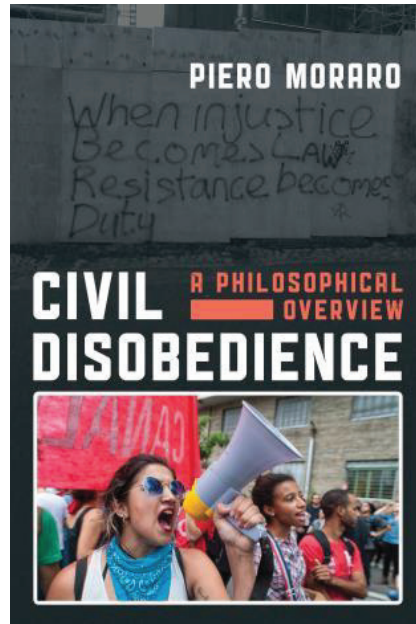
Rowman and Littlefield International

2019, 180 pages

ISBN: 9781786607164 (Hardback)

ISBN: 9781786607171 (Ebook)

Reviewed by Anna Corbo Crehan



Moraro's book, *Civil Disobedience—A Philosophical Overview*, lives up to the promises made in its title. It indeed provides an overview of the philosophical arguments, concepts and theories that have been used to make sense of civil disobedience and to reveal its moral and political dimensions. The book engages with, and extends, a considerable amount of theoretical work, focusing “on the period from the early 2000s to the present” (p. 1). Critically, this focus does not preclude discussion of key figures Gandhi and Martin Luther King (whose respective actions are critiqued against the various accounts of civil disobedience under consideration). Moreover, in surveying the existing work, Moraro develops his own responses to a number of challenging issues that remain unresolved.

The book is divided into six chapters, with an Introduction that provides a useful roadmap for the reader. Chapter 1, “What’s Wrong with Disobedience?,” sets out the philosophical problem posed by civil disobedience, namely how it can be justified qua illegal action when it appears to contradict the fundamental political duty we have to obey the law. The chapter describes, with minimal critique, a number of arguments

for the duty to obey the law, however Moraro concludes that none is able to “establish the wrongness of disobedience per se” (p. 8). As a keystone chapter for all those that follow, this leads me to wonder about the book’s intended audience. On the whole, complex philosophical arguments are rendered accessible for the non-philosopher. However, the frequency with which terms such as *tout court* and *pro tanto* are used to qualify important concepts is likely to be off-putting to those unfamiliar with them, especially as dictionary definitions don’t always convey the niceties of philosophical usage.

Chapter 2 addresses the concept of civility, providing “an account of civility as a disposition to respect fellow citizens as autonomous agents” (p. 27). In turn, this sets up one of the key underpinning arguments of the book, that “for an act of disobedience to be civil, it must persuade, rather than coerce others, for coercion is inherently disrespectful of others’ status as autonomous agents” (p. 33; emphases in original). Much of the remainder of the book turns on what counts as respect for autonomy, especially in regard to persuasion and coercion, with Chapter 4, “Non-violence and Civility” concluding with the claim that “force or violence to compel others to join the communicative enterprise, under some circumstances, may fulfil the duty to respect them as autonomous agents: a commitment to treating others with civility may require one to address others in ways that may infringe on their freedom (yet not also on their autonomy)” (p. 101, emphasis in original). In between, Chapter 3, “Disagreement and Civility,” argues that “Respecting others in the democratic arena calls for sincerity and willingness to face ... disagreement, rather than restraint and avoidance of conflict. This is something we owe them as autonomous agents” (p. 62; emphasis in original).

In Chapter 5, the issue of whether there is a moral right to civil disobedience is considered, along with the subsequent question of what such a right might mean for the existence of a moral justification to punish acts of disobedience. This chapter, while of critical conceptual importance overall, raised a number of issues in regard to the book’s aims and intended readership. In the Introduction, Moraro noted that the book “is organised around themes rather than individual authors” (pp. 1–2). Of the six

sections within Chapter 5, however, three are organised around individual authors, making it difficult for the reader (especially the non-philosopher) to understand the corresponding themes. This difficulty could have been addressed via a conclusion, however the chapter ends rather abruptly with a discussion of William Smith, and no clear segue to the next chapter.

Moraro's arguments in relation to three outstanding issues identified in the preceding chapters are presented in Chapter 6. The novelty of these arguments lies in the fact that they rely on an account of political obligation that "hinges on the notion of respect for, rather than obedience to, the law" (p. 129; emphases in original), while continuing to build on earlier arguments about respect for others' autonomy. The arguments in this chapter are made and well sign-posted. Even if a non-philosopher reader has found prior chapters difficult to wade through, Chapter 6 should be accessible and may even enable them to go back and make sense of the earlier material on which it draws. The chapter lacks a concluding section that ties-up the book's threads succinctly; instead, it ends with a short subsection titled "Why a Racist Cannot Be Civil." Notwithstanding the importance of that discussion, it seems an odd note on which to conclude.

Civil Disobedience—A Philosophical Overview is an important addition to the literature on civil disobedience, especially at this current time when people of all political persuasions are searching for ways to prosecute political arguments. Despite some minor drawbacks, Moraro's virtue ethics-based focus on agents and their dispositions, together with his distinction between respecting "rather than merely obey[ing], the law" (p. 3), brings clarity to the relevant debates, in ways that are both intellectually rigorous and practically applicable.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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