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Plato, *Crito* 50E-51A

In the selected passage from Plato's *Crito*, Socrates makes contradictory and unclear claims regarding his argument for why one owes obedience to his or her respective city. Three specific claims to be examined in this paper include: 1) the absent basis for why the father/country relationship should be accepted, 2) the contradiction in the retaliation argument, and 3) the ambiguous definition of what it means to do "harm" and how that deficiency potentially discredits Socrates' argument against escaping prison.

The main topic of the selected passage, 50 E – 51 A, is retaliation and consists of Socrates' reasons as to why retaliation against his own country and laws is unjust. He takes time in illustrating the relationship between moral superiors and inferiors, comparing a father to his offspring and then drawing a parallel to a relationship between a country and its citizens. Socrates does this with the intent to show Crito that he (Socrates) is morally subordinate to the city of Athens, and therefore must obey by its laws and not escape from prison.

With the country as the superior and the citizen as the subordinate, it is easy to understand why Socrates would think he has a duty to obey the laws, whether they be just or unjust. However, Socrates does not any support for this claim. He elaborates on the description of the relationship between a country and its citizens, but he fails to furnish any justification for why such a relationship exists. The claim lacks any methodical exploration that would deem it worthy of consideration.

A second contradictory claim that Socrates makes is in regards to when he believes retaliation to be permissible and when he believes it to be impermissible. Socrates states, “do you think that we are on equal footing in regards to the right, and that whatever we do to you it is right for you to do to us (50 E)?” This seems to imply that there are in fact times when Socrates believes it is a just act to retaliate against either a moral equal or a moral subordinate. The phrase, “do you think we are on equal footing” suggests that if one were equal to another, then retaliation would be justified because there was nobody superior to obey to. Both parties would be “on equal footing” and therefore would both have an equal right to retaliate against one another. The contradiction seems to arise when comparing this passage to an earlier one when Socrates states, “Nor must one, when wronged, inflict harm in return (49 A).” In this excerpt, Socrates seems to be arguing that it is never just to retaliate, regardless of any equal relationship that two people may be sharing. Because of this opposition, it is hard to distinguish whether retaliation, according to Socrates, is never justified or if it is sometimes justified. Without the ability to stand a firm position on either of these two claims, it is difficult to accept Socrates’ view that that a citizen is always subordinate to the laws of a city.

Now, if one were to overlook the previous two inconsistencies, there still lies a third issue regarding Socrates’ obscure definition of what the word “harm” implies. This is important because if escaping prison and fleeing from Athens does not inflict any harm on the city, then all of Socrates’ efforts in explaining the morally subordinate and insubordinate relationships, along with the retaliation-permissible and impermissible acts become futile.

In the selected passage, Socrates makes the claim that escaping prison would be retaliation against one’s country and its laws. However, in a passage shortly after he argues, “one who disobeys does wrong in three ways (51 E).” What is important here is not the three ways in

which the retaliating citizen has done wrong, but merely that Socrates classifies such a retaliating citizen as a “wrongdoer.” An extension of this claim is found in an earlier passage that states, “Doing people harm is no different from wrongdoing (49 C).” So here, from these two passages, it can be concluded that anyone who does wrong to the city also does harm to the city. But here is where the precise definition of “harm” is crucial. In a third, earlier passage, Socrates seems to define the word “harm” to be “making a man foolish (44 D).” So, in adding this claim to the previous two, it can be concluded that, one who retaliates against his country is a wrongdoer, and a wrongdoer is one who causes harm, and one who causes harm inflicts foolishness on a man. But without a clear understanding of how Socrates is making the city of Athens foolish, or alternatively, without a clear definition of what Socrates really believes the term “harm” to mean, he fails to hold any substantial argument as to why he should not escape prison and flee the city of Athens.

While there are other inconsistencies that exist within Socrates’ arguments in the *Crito*, for the purposes of this paper, it is only these three that have been selected for consideration.