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Bolingbroke, Plato, and Speeding

by Lydia Newby

(Honors English 2228 and Honors Philosophy 1110)

In Shakespeare's play *Richard II*, Henry Bolingbroke stages a rebellion against King Richard which ends with himself on the throne and Richard dead. Henry justified his revolt using two assumptions: first, that the King did wrong, and second, that his wrong actions justified his removal as sovereign. Although Henry attempted to make his assumptions firmly connected, in reality they are two separate issues, for an unjust government does not necessarily justify rebellion. In this paper I will be arguing that while Bolingbroke's first assumption was correct, his second assumption was unethical.

To show that Richard's actions were wrong we must examine the judgment of the characters in the play. It appears that the King's subjects have little doubt he did wrong. His uncle Gaunt, Bolingbroke's father, says to Richard, "O, had thy grandsire with a prophet's eye seen how his son's son should destroy his sons, from forth thy reach he would have laid thy shame, deposing thee before thou wert possessed" (2.1.110-114). He wished that Richard had never become king, implying with the words "destroy his sons" that the King had something to do with at least one of his uncle's deaths. His other uncle York also cries against Richard taking Henry's inheritance, saying, "Take Hereford's rights away, and take from time his charters and his customary rights; let not tomorrow then ensue today; be not thyself; for how art thou a king but by fair sequence and succession?" (2.1.204-208). Thus, when Richard took the property that was Henry Bolingbroke's by right of succession he violated the same system that had put him on the throne. Richard himself sees things he did wrong, for when he is urged to confess to a compiled statement of his wrongs he says, "Must I do so? And must I ravel out my weaved-up follies?" (4.1.238-239). There is therefore little doubt that Richard was immoral in his actions, for not only did he and others agree on this, but he violated the very system by which his authority existed.

The second assumption Henry Bolingbroke makes is that the wrongs Richard performed justify his deposition. On this point the characters in the play disagree. Richard II, while he does accept the fact that he did wrong, argues that it was still wrong for Henry to depose him, saying, "...you Pilates have here delivered me to my sour cross, and water cannot wash away your sin" (4.1.251-253). The bishop of Carlisle agrees, saying, "What subject can give sentence on his king? ...shall the figure of God's majesty...be judged by subject and inferior breath, and he himself not present?" (4.1.127-135). Carlisle argues that Richard II is the divine representative of God on Earth, and thus he cannot be judged by his subjects. There are others who hold to this view as well, including the abbot of Westminster.

Naturally, Bolingbroke and his supporters try to argue that Richard's wrong actions merit his disposition, but the way in which they do this casts heavy suspicion upon their true thoughts. From the first, when Henry arrives with an army and Richard's representative York accuses him of treason, Northumberland replies, "The noble duke hath sworn his coming is but for his own, and for the right of that we all have strongly sworn to give him aid. And let him never see joy that breaks that oath" (2.3.152-155). Bolingbroke himself sends a message to King Richard saying, "Henry...sends allegiance and true faith of heart...even at his feet to lay my arms and power, provided that my banishment repealed and lands restored again be freely granted" (3.3.36-43).

While the rebel's words appear to say that Bolingbroke's only motive is to regain his rightful inheritance, their actions clearly counter their words. After Bolingbroke receives back his

inheritance, he does not disperse the army and go peacefully back to his lands. He holds court to determine who killed his uncle, something that is clearly not his role as an obedient subject. When Richard gives up the crown it is not because he wants to, but because he is forced to. When the bishop of Carlisle attempts to protest, he is arrested by charge of treason to Bolingbroke, who is not yet king! Clearly Henry tried to disguise his intentions, as do the nobles who supported him. The Earl of Northumberland speaks of Henry's arrival in England with an army, saying to his friends, "If then we will...wipe off the dust that hides our scepter's gilt, and make high majesty look like itself, away with me in post" (2.1.302-307). Can he really mean that the restoring of Bolingbroke's lands will make King Richard look like he really should? It seems logical that he is in reality speaking of a new king in Henry, who he thinks will be an ideal replacement of Richard.

Because of the great attempts by Henry Bolingbroke to disguise his true intentions, it appears that in reality he does not believe he is justified in coming to England to take the throne. If he really thought that Richard's actions justified his dethroning, why not depose him openly under those conditions? Instead, he chooses to quietly force the King to give up his crown, under the pretense that Richard had confessed to the wrongs he had done and then voluntarily decided he was not fit to be king.

It would seem then that even the characters who boldly overthrew Richard believed that their action was not right. Why do all the characters in the play appear to think this? Carlisle would argue that this is because it violates the laws of God, for the king is God's minister on earth. If one is a Christian this seems logical. Indeed, in Shakespeare's play *Henry V*, Bolingbroke's son asks God not to hold his father's sin against him, reminding him of all the things he did to atone for it! (Henry V, 4.1.303-316). While a person can disobey the government if asked to do something that is against God's law, it appears that rebellion is not an option. After all, Jesus did not allow his disciples to fight against the Romans who arrested and executed him unjustly. Paul commands the Christians in Rome to be subject to the government, explaining, "For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God." (Romans 13:1). But, in other instances, when Christians were expressly commanded to do things contrary to what they believed God had commanded, they disobeyed, saying, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). It would appear then that Christians, unless they are commanded to do something which goes against God's laws, must submit to authority.

It is very interesting to compare the Christians' standard of obedience to authority with that of Plato in his work *Crito*. Much like Jesus, Plato's Socrates had been condemned to death for teaching. Both Socrates and Jesus chose not to use their power and escape the sentence of the authorities, and both were executed. But Socrates arrives at a different conclusion. He states, "Has a philosopher like you failed to discover that our country is more to be valued and higher and holier far than mother or father or any ancestor, and more to be regarded in the eyes of the gods and of men of understanding?" (Plato, 421), and "Do you imagine that a state can subsist and not be overthrown, in which the decisions of law have no power, but are set aside and overthrown by individuals?" (Plato, 421). This is where Plato diverges from Christianity. While Christianity calls for submission to authority, it also allows for disobedience when submission would require the violation of God's law. If Plato's argument is that the state is to be greatly valued and its rules must be upheld or it will perish, does it not follow as well that one should therefore obey at all times? However, while Plato allows that one can argue to turn the authorities in one's favor or leave, those options are not always available. Could I consent to kill an innocent person as ordered by the government if my attempts at argument had failed and I was not allowed to leave? Since I agree with Plato that a state should be valued and its laws obeyed, and yet I think there has to be a consistent standard by which to measure disobedience, Christianity both supplies that standard and seems the most logical.

I have to conclude, then, that while I agree with Plato that one should not revolt against the government because that would destroy the state, I argue that there are occasions when it is necessary

to *disobey*. Bolingbroke's rebellion was not justified by Christianity or Plato, and I would declare him unethical, or at the very least entirely inconsistent. I judge him on the basis of Christianity because he portrays himself as a Christian king, declaring, "In God's name, I'll ascend the regal throne" (4.1.119).

While it is easy to declare Henry Bolingbroke unethical, it is difficult to apply the same principles to today's world. Most people here in the United States would not have trouble with the issue of a revolution against our government; they would struggle with the idea of the need to obey the government to be ethical. Even Christianity's allowances for the laws of God do not leave much justifiable disobedience! In application to my own life, I have found that I cannot declare violating the speed limit on a regular basis to be ethical (much to certain people's dismay). Neither can I justify avoiding taxes or running stop signs. Now I am left with the question of whether it is ethical to let another person drive when I wish to get home quickly, if they do not have the same convictions!

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