Moral Or Immoral Essay, Research Paper

In Martin Luther King Jr.’s essay, A Letter from Birmingham Jail he compares the issues of Moral acts verses Immoral acts. This essay was written in response to a letter some clergymen had written after a direct action march Dr. King had participated in. In their letter the clergymen had praised the local police officers and media for the nonviolent and calm manner in which the situation was handled. It was this praise that prompted Dr King to write:

“I have tried to make clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends. But now I must affirm that it is just as wrong or perhaps even more so, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends.”

The beginning of this statement refers to the idea of using violence to get the result that you feel you deserve. The second part to this statement refers to doing the right thing to ensure that an injustice will prevail. It is this issue of moral verses immoral that Doctor King bases.

The first example of the morality issue Dr. King raises is a just law, verses an unjust law. In his essay Dr King describes to his readers 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.” Here Doctor King is defending his belief that there is a moral issue in some laws. He defends his statement by giving an example of Germany during the Nazi rule. King discusses what Hitler had done to the Jews in Nazi Germany and adds that at the time, this was legal. It was also illegal to help a Jew and those who did were considered lawbreakers. This is a perfect example of where a law had existed that was immoral.

King also struggles with the issues of laws he believes are moral, however they have immoral consequences. For example, King states, “For instance, I have been arrested on a charge of parading without a permit.” Dr. King believes this is fair and that the law against parading without a permit is just. However as King continues to discuss his argument he seems to believe that the law is immoral “when it is used to maintain segregation and to deny citizens the First Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and protest.” Here King describes the struggle between his desires to obey the law, while expressing his need to openly protest those laws in which he views as morally unjust.

The final moral issue Dr. King confronts is the issue of segregation. He remarks in his essay, “I can urge men to obey the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court, for it is morally right; and I can urge them to disobey segregation ordinances, for they are morally wrong.” Here is a perfect example of King’s struggle with laws and their relevance to morality. On one hand King supports the Supreme Court’s decision to desegregate the schools because it is morally correct. On the other hand he would urge people to disobey segregation ordinances because desegregation in schools is only half the battle. Dr. King argues his position on segregation with the following “segregation is not only politically, economically, and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and sinful.” Here King argues that although the Supreme Court ruling was a small step towards desegregation it does not eliminate the entire issue. Therefore he cannot urge his followers to support the immoral laws of segregation.

Throughout his essay Dr. King raises the moral issues of what he was facing when he helped organize the direct action march. It was his morality that helped to make Dr Martin Luther King Jr. a great pioneer for his people. He had fought hard to defend the moral laws and even harder to change the immoral ones.