



Civil Disobedience

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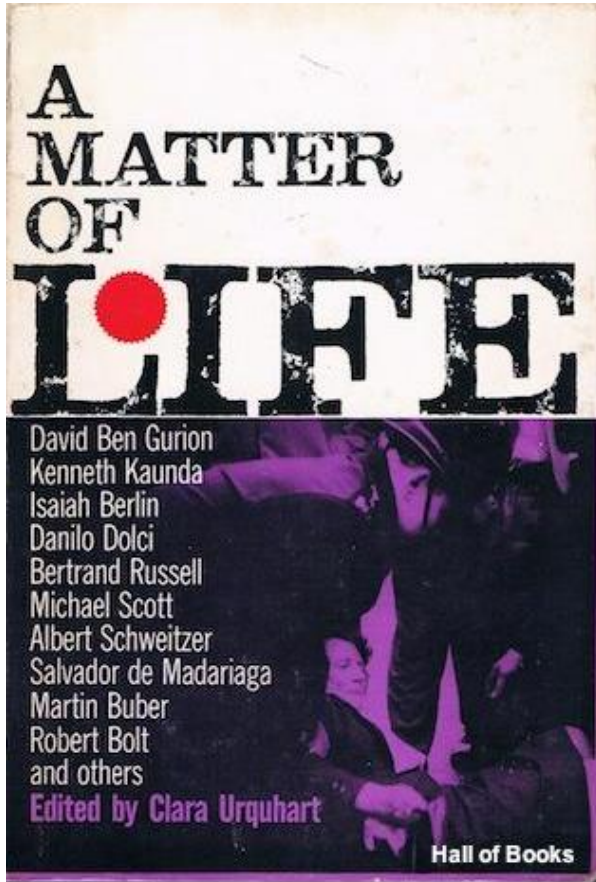
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Civil Disobedience

Contribution to Clara Urquhart (ed.), *A Matter of Life* (London, 1963: Cape), 39–40.¹ [‘a collection of essays by leading thinkers, politicians and writers about the legitimacy and effectiveness of civil disobedience and rebelliousness’ (Amazon)].



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CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

EVEN THOUGH all institutions are means to the goals that men pursue for their own sakes and not ends in themselves, yet some of these, like language, family and other forms of basic intercourse, are part of the essence of what men are, and cannot be donned and doffed like a cloak. And since these essential institutions require rules and at times authority to enforce rules, if men are not to collide with each other and suffer too much, this is the case for authority, even on utilitarian grounds.

For this reason I agree with Hume that stability in a society is important, so that it may be better at times to suffer bad laws than to alter these laws so frequently as to undermine the authority of laws and institutions as such, which may end by causing greater misery than the bad laws and institutions themselves. But peace and stability – still less laws, customs, rules – are not ultimate values, as are truth, or love, or friendship, or freedom, or art, or justice, or equality, or life itself.

Every man carries within him some image or notion, more or less clear, of what human beings are, and therefore what actions will diminish or destroy the minimum degree of humanity without which men cannot live as men. If I am ordered by an authority which I normally accept, whether on conscious utilitarian grounds, or as part of my normal habits of life (and such acceptance comes to involve a good deal of faith, loyalty and emotional attachment), to do something that goes against this basic concept of man, I am morally entitled to resist.

Indeed, this is what morality is about. Where passive disobedience should turn into active resistance – even terrorism – will depend on how high a price I think it right to pay to hamper or destroy such authority. If it is such that I believe that no worse rule could exist, and that the consequences of its destruction cannot possibly be worse than its [40] retention, that no other methods likely to remove such rule are open to me, and that the act of disobedience is likely to help to alter the situation for the better, I am forced to extreme measures. But unless I have rational grounds for thinking all this, my resistance is not justified.

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If I accepted Lord Russell's argument during the First World War, or believed what he believes about nuclear war today, I should like to think that I should behave like him. But in fact I do not agree with his premisses or conclusions in either case.

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