CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE AND ANIMAL RESCUE

A REPLY TO MILLIGAN

Daniel Weltman

T

ony Milligan argues that some forms of covert nonhuman animal rescue (hereafter “animal rescue”), wherein activists anonymously and illegally free nonhuman animals from confinement, should be understood as acts of civil disobedience. However, most traditional understandings of civil disobedience require that the civil disobedient act publicly rather than covertly and thus rule out animal rescue. Milligan’s argument is part of a larger project to widen the scope of civil disobedience. I argue that at least insofar as animal rescue is concerned, we ought not to widen civil disobedience’s scope. Animal rescue ought instead to be classed elsewhere under the broad notion of “resistance.”

Milligan highlights three reasons why civil disobedience is not supposed to be covert and attacks all three of them. The first reason is that “civil disobedience cannot take the form of action which is intrinsically suspect, and

1 Milligan, “Animal Rescue as Civil Disobedience” and Civil Disobedience.
2 Bedau, “On Civil Disobedience,” 556; Lang, “Civil Disobedience and Nonviolence,” 156; Smart, “Defining Civil Disobedience,” 256; Rawls, A Theory of Justice, 320–21; Regan, Empty Cages, 194; Mancilla, “Noncivil Disobedience and the Right of Necessity”; Celikates, “Rethinking Civil Disobedience as a Practice of Contestation,” 38; Edyvane and Kulenovic, “Disruptive Disobedience”; Allen and von Essen, “Is the Radical Animal Rights Movement Ethically Vigilante?” 270; Delmas, A Duty to Resist, 42. By “covertly” I mean the actor carries out their actions in secret and does not subsequently reveal their identity. Thus, those who engage in “open animal rescue,” which entails rescuing animals covertly but then revealing one’s identity, are not acting “covertly” in the relevant sense. This usage of “covert” accords with Milligan’s usage of the term, but it is not universal. For instance, Kimberley Brownlee uses the term “covert disobedience” to refer to cases in which one only reveals one’s identity after the fact (Brownlee, “Features of a Paradigm Case of Civil Disobedience,” 348–49). I believe Brownlee would agree with me that covert disobedience in the sense referred to by Milligan does not count as civil disobedience: she seems not to even compass the possibility of civil disobedience in which the disobedient never reveals their identity. William Scheuerman also notes this point about Brownlee (Scheuerman, Civil Disobedience, 146).
3 Milligan, Civil Disobedience.
there is always something intrinsically suspect about covertness.” The second is that “civil disobedients are protestors who accept the consequences of their actions and this requires that they must act publicly and must disclose their identities.” The third is that “civil disobedience is primarily a form of address, a form of communication which is, by its nature, a public act.” I will not contest Milligan’s responses to the first point. The key disagreements turn on the second point about publicity and the third point about what Milligan calls “the communication thesis.”

1. PUBLICITY, CONSEQUENCES, AND RESISTANCE

Some argue that protesters must accept the consequences of their actions. Doing so requires publicity and identity disclosure, which would mean that animal rescue cannot be civil disobedience. Milligan resists this conclusion because accepting the consequences of one’s actions “may better capture the outlook and practice of civil disobedience movements (such as [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] and [Mahatma] Gandhi) rather than the approach of ordinary participants.” Thus, it is not clear that civil disobedience is a practice such that “civil disobedients must act” publicly. We should reject this argument. If we abandon the idea that the civil disobedient must act publicly and accept the consequences of their actions, we risk widening the concept too much. A rejection of the requirement allows actions such as “threats of violence, covert acts of sabotage, blackmail, and even assault” to potentially count as civil disobedience, as Jennifer Welchman argues they do. If civil disobedience as a term applies to this much, or even to some subset of these activities (e.g., animal rescue and similar actions such as tree spiking), it will no longer pick out a relatively distinct,

7 Milligan, “Animal Rescue as Civil Disobedience,” 293.
10 For another argument against Milligan’s claim see Weltman, “Covert Animal Rescue,” 68.
11 Welchman, “Is Ecosabotage Civil Disobedience?” 105. Welchman is unsure whether violence against persons and threats of such violence ought to count as civil disobedience because they “pose perhaps the greatest threat to sociability, so we might argue that both violence and threats against persons should be excluded,” although she is fine with acts such as tree spiking that can result in injury so long as loggers are adequately warned of the threat (“Is Ecosabotage Civil Disobedience?” 105, emphasis added).
useful category of investigation. It will be almost coextensive with the broader notion of “resistance” as articulated by a number of authors.

This broader notion of resistance encompasses both the traditional categories of disobedience and also some new categories. The traditional categories include what Joseph Raz dubs “revolutionary disobedience,” “civil disobedience,” and “conscientious objection” and what Michael Martin dubs “conscientious wrongdoing.” These categories have recently been expanded to include “uncivil disobedience” and “subrevolution”—the former dispenses with one or more of the traditional requirements of civil disobedience, such as nonviolence or publicity, and the latter covers disobedience that aims to alter only part of a government rather than the entire government.

One ought not to draw distinctions merely because it is possible, but this is a case where distinctions are helpful. A distinction between civil disobedience and concepts describing other forms of resistance, such as uncivil disobedience and subrevolution, helps us think more clearly about differing tactics, justifications, and responses. Resistance broadly speaking need not be nonviolent or public, nor do resistors necessarily need to accept punishment for their actions, whereas many think civil disobedience must be limited in one or more of these ways. There is no reason to think resistance’s justifications are limited to sincere justifications, a limit Kimberley Brownlee places on civil disobedience.

There is no need to think our approach to legal punishment or penalization for civil disobedience must mirror our approach to legal punishment or penalization for other forms of resistance. It is not clear that justifications for avoiding punishment

---

12 Milligan thinks tree spiking poses a risk of predictable harm that is “perhaps high enough to rule out any claim of civil disobedience” (Civil Disobedience, 114). He also points out that tree spiking “may not be more reckless than driving a car” (115). Notwithstanding this, Milligan argues that the risk is high enough such that tree spiking no longer counts as civil disobedience but could so have counted before we realized its precise degree of recklessness in 1987 (115).
14 Raz, The Authority of Law, 263; Martin, “Ecosabotage and Civil Disobedience.”
17 Lefkowitz, “On a Moral Right to Civil Disobedience” and “In Defense of Penalizing (but Not Punishing) Civil Disobedience”; Brownlee, “Penalizing Public Disobedience” and “Two Tales of Civil Disobedience.”
that apply to civil disobedience on its own ought to apply to resistance more broadly.\textsuperscript{18} Revolutions and subrevolutions are appropriate in cases where civil disobedience might be inappropriate, and vice versa.\textsuperscript{19} The same applies for any considerations one might adduce about which we might reach differing judgments with respect to other forms of resistance versus civil disobedience. Thus, although Milligan is right to claim that the mere fact that civil disobedients often act publicly is not alone a reason to think that civil obedience must be public, in light of how wide the concept becomes if we abandon the publicity requirement, we should retain it unless we have some further active reason to eliminate it.

2. COMMUNICATION

Milligan’s third defense of covert civil disobedience hinges on his rejection of the communication thesis.\textsuperscript{20} He notes that Rawls’s influential approach to civil disobedience was novel mostly for its treatment of civil disobedience as “a form of communication.”\textsuperscript{21} The communication thesis is also perhaps the most enduring feature of the Rawlsian approach, as most theorists of civil disobedience have attacked one or another of Rawls’s other commitments.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{18} Moraro, “On (Not) Accepting the Punishment for Civil Disobedience”; Weltman, “Must I Accept Prosecution for Civil Disobedience?” Moreover, Moraro’s justification for dropping the consequences requirement for civil disobedience would still not allow animal rescue to count as civil disobedience, because he still accepts the publicity condition (“On (Not) Accepting the Punishment for Civil Disobedience”).

\textsuperscript{19} Weltman, “You Say You Want Half a Revolution?”

\textsuperscript{20} Milligan, \textit{Civil Disobedience}, 18–21.

\textsuperscript{21} Milligan, \textit{Civil Disobedience}, 18. Other classic accounts, such as Habermas’s (\textit{Between Facts and Norms}, 148, 383), endorse the communication thesis. Communication is also key to many contemporary accounts. See Smith, “Civil Disobedience and the Public Sphere” and \textit{Civil Disobedience and Deliberative Democracy}; Scheuerman, \textit{Civil Disobedience}, 118; Lai, “Justifying Uncivil Disobedience”; Lai and Lim, Environmental Activism and the Fairness of Costs Argument for Uncivil Disobedience.” The disjunctive obligation to “persuade or obey” articulated in Plato’s \textit{Crito} perhaps also presages the thesis. (Cf. Kraut, \textit{Socrates and the State}; Irwin, “Review: Socratic Inquiry and Politics,” 400–7; Penner, “Two Notes on the \textit{Crito},” 155–66). As noted by William Herr, already in 1972 Elliot M. Zashin claimed that “a study of recent academic writing on civil disobedience . . . yields a rough consensus” on the requirement that civil disobedience “be done with intent primarily to educate or persuade the majority” (Zashin, \textit{Civil Disobedience and Democracy}, 110; Herr, “Thoreau,” 88). Zashin’s and Rawls’s accounts were contemporaneous, and thus it seems the communicative approach was influential even before Rawls.

\textsuperscript{22} Milligan, \textit{Civil Disobedience}, 18. Opponents of the communication thesis include Milligan, \textit{Civil Disobedience}, 18–21; Welchman, “Is Ecosabotage Civil Disobedience?”; and Bedau, “On Civil Disobedience.” Raz has a disjunctive account of civil disobedience according to which communication is only required for one of the disjuncts (\textit{The Authority of Law}, 263).
drops the communication thesis for various reasons. But if the communication thesis is the core of the Rawlsian approach, what is left of civil disobedience once we drop it? We are left with something like Hugo Bedau’s pre-Rawls account: “anyone commits an act of civil disobedience if and only if he acts illegally, publicly, nonviolently, and conscientiously with the intent to frustrate (one of) the laws, policies, or decisions of his government.” Bedau’s account is nearly equivalent to the first disjunct in Raz’s disjunctive view, according to which civil disobedience is “a politically motivated breach of the law designed either to contribute directly to a change of a law or of a public policy or to express one’s protest against, and disassociation [sic] from, a law or a public policy.” Bedau includes, whereas Raz omits, the nonviolence requirement.

One worry is that, for reasons defended by others, we may want to drop some of these requirements, such as nonviolence. Milligan himself wants to drop publicity and nonviolence. Because Bedau’s definition includes publicity, it rules out animal rescue. But let us grant that we can salvage something like the Bedau account and apply it to animal rescue. What makes this disobedience civil? For Bedau, “the pun on ‘civil’ is essential; only nonviolent acts thus can qualify.” Nonviolence as Bedau understands it rules out property damage of the sort Milligan explicitly compasses, and Milligan explicitly aims to avoid ruling out “surprising forms of violence that were not envisaged when we accepted the claim that civil disobedience must be non-violent or largely and aspirationally non-violent.” So, what can civility amount to if it does not amount to the communication thesis, or to nonviolence, or to publicity, or to a combination of these things, as Bedau himself thought?

23 He describes his view as “a civility-focused account by contrast with a communication-based account” (Milligan, Civil Disobedience, 37).


25 Raz, The Authority of Law, 263. Raz specifies that he focuses only on “morally motivated,” or in other words conscientious, disobedience (263).


28 Milligan, Civil Disobedience, 150. Milligan thinks that “premeditated violence” disqualifies something from counting as civil disobedience, although it is unclear why (22). Perhaps it is because premeditated violence is “difficult to reconcile with any familiar understanding of civil disobedience” (55). But Welchman’s approach compasses blackmail and other actions equally difficult to reconcile, and Milligan endorses Welchman’s arguments (Milligan, Civil Disobedience, 20). So, it is not clear how Milligan can reject her conclusion. See also Milligan, Civil Disobedience, 135–36.
It is not quite clear. Milligan is clear that there are “basic norms” of civility that a protest “must not violate or break beyond a certain point if it is to stay within civil bounds,” including respect for others, the rejection of hate speech, “the largely successful commitment to try to avoid violence and threats of violence,” and others, although it is not obvious what the “certain point” is or how successful one must be in order to be “largely” successfully committed to “trying” to avoid violence.\(^{29}\) He is also clear about wanting civil disobedience to encompass more than just “indirect civil disobedience,” which aims at communication and which thus forms the basis of the Rawlsian approach.\(^{30}\) It should also include “a certain kind of direct action in which communication plays (at most) a subordinate role,” as it did in “the Civil Rights Movement,” which “primarily involved what King openly referred to as direct action (not lovingly addressed to the conscience of the opponent but aimed instead at embarrassing the Federal Government into enforcing its laws).”\(^{31}\) Similarly, the Indian independence movement “involved both indirect protest . . . as well as direct action.”\(^{32}\) Thus, Milligan asks, “why not, for example, embrace a disjunctive account such that civil disobedience can be \textit{either} communicative or direct action?\(^{33}\) But it is not clear how rhetorical the question is. Milligan says that “a disjunctive approach to the concept looks promising,” but whether it looks promising enough to adopt is left unstated.\(^{34}\) Such a disjunctive account would return us to Raz’s view, which Milligan does not discuss.

At other points, however, Milligan, unlike Raz, seems to want to abandon the communicative part entirely: “the retention of the [communicative] thesis risks turning civil disobedience into an endangered concept” because it lends weight to “the argument that civil disobedience is overly deferential to authority,” such that activists may abandon the concept entirely.\(^{35}\) (Thus, perhaps the question about the disjunctive approach was a genuine question, and the answer is that we should discard the communicative requirement.) Why would we worry about activists abandoning the concept? That is, what is wrong if activists by definition turn out to not be engaging in civil disobedience when they engage in animal rescue? The answer is that “no other concept carries the

\(^{29}\) Milligan, \textit{Civil Disobedience}, 36. For an objection about whether this is an alternative to the communicative approach see Scheuerman, \textit{Civil Disobedience}, 145.

\(^{30}\) Milligan, “Animal Rescue as Civil Disobedience,” 295.


\(^{32}\) Milligan, “Animal Rescue as Civil Disobedience,” 295.

\(^{33}\) Milligan, “Animal Rescue as Civil Disobedience,” 295.

\(^{34}\) Milligan, “Animal Rescue as Civil Disobedience,” 296. It is also in tension with his earlier claim (noted above in note 23) that his approach opposes communicative views.

\(^{35}\) Milligan, “Animal Rescue as Civil Disobedience,” 296.
moral authority of ‘civil disobedience’, and none is likely to do so for the foreseeable future. . . . What is then in danger of being lost is the ongoing relevance of a concept of protest that still has a great deal of work left to do.”

Milligan’s argument here begs the question, because whether the concept has a great deal left to do with respect to animal rescue hinges on whether it accurately describes animal rescue. But, more relevantly, if we drop the communicative thesis and everything else Milligan seems to want to drop, it is hard to know what is left in the “civil” part of civil disobedience. Milligan thinks that civility and communication are contrasting focuses rather than that the latter constitutes an elaboration of the former. But Milligan’s notion of civility allows rather wide leeway for engaging in what we might think of as uncivil behavior, such as theft and property destruction, because civility only entails respecting people “as persons” rather than “as racists or as anti-Semites” or as other sorts of things. Given that one need only be largely successful in trying to avoid violence, the door is open for the occasional violent failure to count as civil disobedience. And Milligan is wary even of using this minimal notion of civility for categorization purposes, because “to couch matters in terms of civility . . . may be a questionable basis upon which” to determine what counts as civil disobedience. Given that we have the wider category of resistance, we do not need to widen civil disobedience as much as Milligan (or Raz) would have us do. We have space for uncivil forms of resistance that we can use to discuss all sorts of behavior rather than labeling it civil disobedience. So, we might think that if the civility requirement is abandoned, then we have changed the subject to other forms of resistance rather than enlarged our concept of civil disobedience.

However, Milligan still thinks we should retain the civility requirement: he suggests that if civil disobedience were about communication rather than civility, it would be hard to explain the actions of those who, like Henry David Thoreau, display “an unwillingness to suspend illegal activism in return for a proper hearing as, perhaps, they ought to do if they view civil disobedience as communication.” As I have argued elsewhere, it is not clear that the sort of hearings available to disobedients are “proper.” But even granting this point,

37 See also my arguments in Weltman, “Covert Animal Rescue,” 69–70.
38 Milligan, Civil Disobedience, 13.
39 Milligan, Civil Disobedience, 17. It is not clear how exactly we are meant to slice people into the parts we have to respect and the parts we do not.
40 Milligan, Civil Disobedience, 17.
41 Milligan, Civil Disobedience, 146.
42 Weltman, “Must I Accept Prosecution for Civil Disobedience?”
it works equally well against Milligan in this case. The fact that animal rescuers
would not be satisfied with a proper hearing suggests they are not engaged in
civil disobedience.

3. CONCLUSION

Milligan’s arguments for labeling animal rescue as civil disobedience are under-
motivated and face powerful objections. It would therefore be better to label
animal rescue as some form of resistance other than civil disobedience and
to reserve the term for actions that more clearly fit the bill (e.g., open rescue).
Whether this spells trouble for Milligan’s attempts to widen civil disobedience
more broadly is a further topic, but insofar as we are concerned with animal
rescue, we ought to refrain from widening the concept.43

Ashoka University
danny.weltman@ashoka.edu.in

REFERENCES

Adams, N. P. “Uncivil Disobedience: Political Commitment and Violence.” Res
Allen, Michael, and Erica von Essen. “Is the Radical Animal Rights Movement
Ethically Vigilante?” Between the Species 22, no. 1 (Fall 2018): 260–85.
Bedau, Hugo A. “On Civil Disobedience.” Journal of Philosophy 58, no. 21 (Octo-
Brownlee, Kimberley. Conscience and Conviction: The Case for Civil Disobedi-
———. “Features of a Paradigm Case of Civil Disobedience.” Res Publica 10,
no. 4 (December 2004): 337–51.
———. “Two Tales of Civil Disobedience: A Reply to David Lefkowitz.” Res
Celikates, Robin. “Rethinking Civil Disobedience as a Practice of Contesta-
tion—Beyond the Liberal Paradigm.” Constellations 23, no. 1 (March 2016):

43 I thank at least two anonymous reviewers and an associate editor for this journal for their
very helpful questions and comments.


———. “On (Not) Accepting the Punishment for Civil Disobedience.” *The