



## City Research Online

### City, University of London Institutional Repository

---

**Citation:** Blunt, G. D. (2020). Sometimes the most powerful act of resistance is to do nothing. Aeon,

This is the published version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

---

**Permanent repository link:** <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/25535/>

**Link to published version:**

**Copyright:** City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

**Reuse:** Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

## Support Aeon

'I learn more about how to think about the world from Aeon than probably any other publication I regularly read.'

Elizabeth B, USA, Friend of Aeon

Aeon is a registered charity committed to the spread of knowledge and a cosmopolitan worldview. Our mission is to create a sanctuary online for serious thinking.

No ads, no paywall, no clickbait – just thought-provoking ideas from the world's leading thinkers, free to all. **But we can't do it without you.**

Donate Now

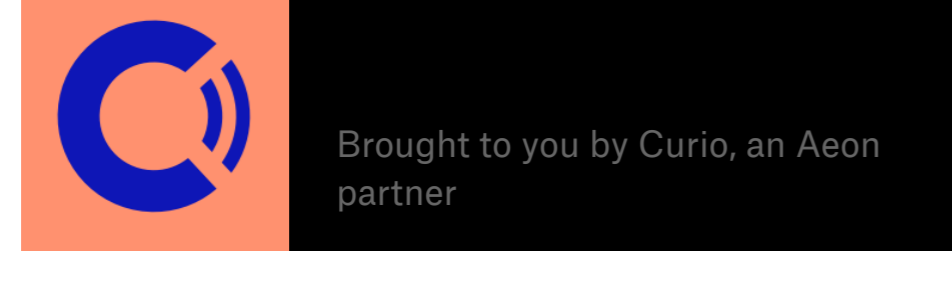
MENU / Q / f @ t

aeon

DONATE / NEWSLETTER / PSYCHE / SIGN IN

# Sometimes the most powerful act of resistance is to do nothing

Gwilym David Blunt is a lecturer in international relations at the Department of International Politics at City, University of London. He is the author of *Global Poverty, Injustice, and Resistance* (2019).



1,100 words

Edited by Nigel Warburton

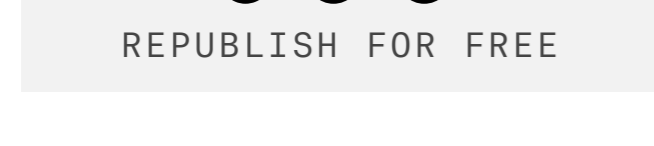


Photo by Richard Baker/Getty

Resistance is a human right. This is why the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that people will be 'compelled to have recourse, in the last resort, to rebellion' if human rights are not respected, and why the defence of human rights framed in many United Nations resolutions supports resistance against colonialism and apartheid. It could not be otherwise. If your rights are violated, you must have a recourse. Normally this would be found in the law and the courts but, when faced with severe and intransigent injustice, resistance is that recourse. But when others are resisting, and we are sympathetic to their aims, what should we do? The answer is surprising.

From autumn 2018 for about a year, the group known as Extinction Rebellion (XR) staged a number of disruptive protests in the United Kingdom, on London's bridges and across several city centres, bringing road traffic to a standstill. The protestors were drawing attention to the need for immediate action on the climate emergency. From their perspective, these were acts of resistance, drawing attention to injustice and inaction. What should someone who is sympathetic to this cause and to their action do? If possible, nothing. But there are different ways of doing nothing. It matters that you do nothing in the right way and for the right reasons. Let me explain.

Rights imply duties. If you have a right to something, other people owe you certain duties. There are at least three negative duties that are generated by the right of resistance: non-interference, non-obstruction and non-collaboration.

Email Save

Tweet 1,091

14 Comments

Aeon for Friends Find out more

### Sign up to our newsletter

Updates on everything new at Aeon.

Your email address   Daily  Weekly

Subscribe → See our newsletter privacy policy [here](#)

The simplest of these is the duty of non-interference. If a person has the right to do something, there is a fundamental duty not to prevent them from doing that thing. So, if a person is enacting their right to resistance, then bystanders have an obligation to forbear and not to interfere. This seems obvious, but there was a rather shocking instance during the London XR protests where this duty was not respected. In October 2019, protestors stopped London trains from working by climbing on top of carriages. At Canning Town in east London, one protestor was dragged off the roof of a carriage and set upon by commuters. This is a violation of the duty of non-interference. It might be that people were angered by having their day disrupted, but this doesn't excuse their behaviour. It might be irritating but we have an obligation to do nothing.

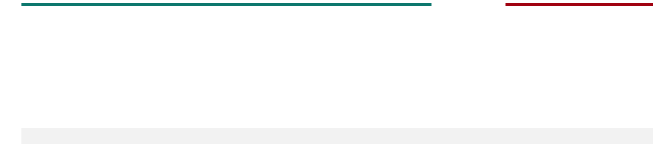
Yet simply not interfering with individuals is not sufficient. Resistance to injustice is often organised. In addition to the obligation not to interfere with individuals, there must also be a duty of non-obstruction to organisations. This is often overlooked, but there are numerous ways in which people can unintentionally obstruct organised resistance. In 1849, Henry 'Box' Brown escaped slavery by mailing himself in a box from Virginia to Pennsylvania. It became a sensation in the media, a fact lamented by the abolitionist Frederick Douglass because it effectively closed this path out of slavery: if journalists had been more circumspect, then more people might have escaped slavery by post. In the age of Twitter, Snapchat, Facebook and TikTok, it is easy to inadvertently obstruct organisations fighting injustice. Posting a video or picture on social media could lead to a protestor being identified by the police or to escape routes being closed. We should avoid getting in the way of what those who are performing acts of resistance try to do. Living up to the duty of non-obstruction requires us to be more conscientious about the ways in which we communicate.

The final negative duty is that of non-collaboration with agencies that are suppressing resistance. If we shouldn't inadvertently obstruct resistance, it follows that we shouldn't actively help to suppress it. Agencies that are engaged in suppressing resistance often depend upon third-party assistance. As the academic Juan Espíndola [found](#) in his research on the German Democratic Republic of 1949-90, the wide network of 'unofficial coworkers' who informed on dissidents and provided logistical support to the Stasi were referred to as the state's 'respiratory organs'. Without collaboration, unjust regimes suffocate. We might think that we aren't pressured to collaborate like this today, but one might look at Apple's decision in 2019 to remove an app that sought to inform prodemocracy protestors in Hong Kong where the police were concentrating and using tear gas. It is possible that, as resistance to climate change grows, 'liberal democratic' states might employ similar pressures. The rule is simple: don't snitch.

So we have at least these three obligations not to do things. Is there anything else we have a duty not to do? One option would be to follow the [example](#) of the philosopher Henry David Thoreau, who in 1846 stopped paying his taxes in response to the US government's unprovoked war with Mexico and continued support for slavery. Thoreau refused to support a state so immersed in injustice. Ought we do the same in relation to the climate emergency? At this stage, I would say no. Democratic states still provide sufficient protection of human rights to warrant some continued support, though this could erode as the climate emergency escalates.

So now that you know how to exercise your obligation to 'do nothing', you must begin to (not) do it. There will no doubt be many opportunities, now that we've welcomed a new decade of the Anthropocene and an area nearly the size of England burned due to drought worldwide, exacerbated by the rising temperatures produced by climate change. Recently, the eyes of the world were on Australia because it is the first advanced postindustrial state that was severely affected by and unable to contain (or, within its leadership, even acknowledge) the climate emergency. One hopes that governments around the world will rise to this existential threat, but the prevarication, truculence and unthinking optimism that characterised the reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic in many developed nations doesn't inspire much hope. Left unchecked, the effect of climate change will continue to spread, and the thousands of Australians who took to the streets in protest in January 2020 will inspire others in acts of resistance as the emergency continues. If we are unable to join protestors, we still have duties to support them with our conscious inactions. It's not just what you do that matters, but what you don't do, too.

[Political philosophy](#) [Politics and government](#) [Human rights and justice](#) 30 March 2020



Aeon is not-for-profit and free for everyone

Make a donation →

Get Aeon straight to your inbox

Join our newsletter →



Video / History of ideas

### Cynicism was born when Diogenes rejected materialism and manners

5 minutes



Essay / Stories and literature

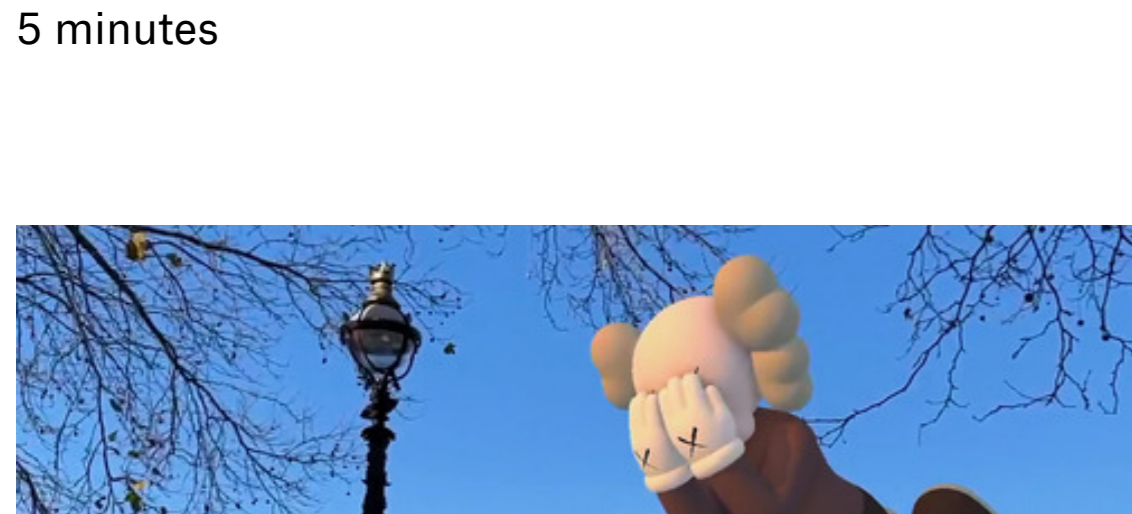
### The wisdom of surrender

Samuel Beckett turned an obscure 17th-century Christian heresy into an artistic vision and an unusual personal philosophy



Idea / Computing and artificial intelligence

### Algorithms associating appearance and criminality have a dark past



Video / Technology and the self

### How an augmented reality app transformed London into an immersive art gallery

6 minutes



Essay / Cities

### The harms of gentrification

The exclusion of poorer people from their own neighbourhoods is not just a social problem but a philosophical one



Idea / Childhood and adolescence

### For a child, being carefree is intrinsic to a well-lived life

Essays About RSS Feed Donate Community Guidelines

Follow Aeon Like 280K Follow @aeonmag Follow YouTube 28K

Sign up to our newsletter Updates on everything new at Aeon.

Your email address   Daily  Weekly

Subscribe → See our newsletter privacy policy [here](#)