

The Philosophical Literature of Henry David Thoreau

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Henry David Thoreau lived a very distinctive life and wrote works that reflected his staunch individualism and great intellect. However, his works are still praised today, in a society that warrants his criticism even more so than did his own. Thoreau's works are filled with very caustic critiques of his own society that are still biting; nevertheless, his work is widely popular and often read. Thoreau was not one to compromise the views he had come to hold because they were different from the majority's: he consistently reprehends the government and educational systems that continue to persist to this day. Additionally, he sullenly denounces the way his contemporaries conform to society's expectations. Yet the reason Thoreau is so esteemed is that he has an ability to do all this while also maintaining the reader's interest and attention. Less talented writers might put off their readers with the harsh words and high ideals that Thoreau uses, but Thoreau, through the method of reform he presented in his work, the organization of his work, and the use of metaphorical hope throughout his work, constantly helped readers along and convinces them to continue.

Thoreau's philosophy is one of individualism. His work resounds with the notion that the individual is more important than society as a whole. He feels it is of the utmost importance that one develop one's life as an individual. He writes that we can come to "carve and paint the atmosphere and medium through which we look" (*Walden* 65; citations are to this work unless otherwise noted). Thoreau suggests that one can begin actualizing one's life in such a way by knowing his or her own thoughts. To avoid one's own precepts in favor of those which society would force upon him or her is something Thoreau strongly opposes. For example, in both Thoreau's and our own time people forsake a deeper knowledge of themselves for the acquisition of material wealth. He addresses this very notion he writes, "I had three pieces of limestone on my desk, but I was terrified to find that they required to be dusted daily, when the furniture of my mind was all undusted still, and I threw them out the window in disgust" (29). The pleasure he gets from having the stones on his desk is not worth the time they take away from endeavors he feels to be much more important. He implores others to follow his example when he says, "[B]e a Columbus to whole new continents and world within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought. Every man is lord of a realm beside which the earthly empire of the Czar is but a petty state, a hummock left by the ice" (213). Thoreau believes that "[h]e is a rich man, and enjoys the fruit of riches, who summer and winter forever can find delight in his own thoughts" (*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* 438). In this statement, with its stoic undertones, one can see Thoreau deems true wealth to be something internal. Only through becoming truly individual, by knowing what one thinks and feels for himself or herself, can one lead a full life. In being true to oneself one may come to contradict many of the verdicts of society, yet Thoreau proposes that it is everyone's duty to know and follow oneself alone. He writes:

If one listens to the faintest but constant suggestions of his genius which are certainly true he sees not to what extremes, or even insanity, it may lead him; and yet that way, as he grow more resolute and faithful, his road lies. The faintest assured objection which one healthy man feels will at length prevail over the arguments and customs of mankind. No man ever followed his genius till it misled him... . If the day and the night are such that you greet them with joy, and life emits a fragrance like flowers and sweet scented herbs, is more elastic, more starry, more immortal,—that is your success. (147)

According to Thoreau, one's highest responsibility is to himself or herself. The reason he gives for going off to live in the forest surrounding Walden Pond exemplifies this: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" (66). Moreover, he learns from his experience at Walden "that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in the common hours ... [;] new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him" (215).

Thoreau was extremely intelligent, and he came to understand the systems of society. He evaluated both the system of government and education for himself. He found that each of them actually discouraged the formation of people who could think for themselves. Since these systems exist in much the same form today as they did in Thoreau's time, many of his observations still hold true. To become an individual, in Thoreau's definition of the word, one must be aware of the flaws inherent in the government and educational system.

Thoreau writes in his essay "Civil Disobedience" that "[t]hat government is best which governs not at all" (279). All of his works reflect this same belief: government would be unnecessary to a good group of individuals. In *Walden* he explains why government would be unnecessary: "The virtues of a superior man are like the wind; the virtues of a common man like the grass; the grass, when the wind passes over it bends" (119). Yet Thoreau senses that government goes beyond simply being a superfluity. It actually does society harm. For instance, government serves to allow people to further separate themselves from their responsibilities as individual moral beings. Thoreau asks, "Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then?" ("Civil Disobedience" 280). This is why Thoreau believes "we should be men first, and subjects afterward" (280). To become a true individual, one must make one's own ethical decisions and not simply permit the laws set up by the government to take the place of a self-created ethics. Thoreau does not understand why government does not "cherish its minority[.] Why it does not encourage its citizens to be on the alert to point out its faults, and *do* better than it would have them? Why does it always crucify Christ, and excommunicate Copernicus and Luther, and pronounce Washington and Franklin rebels?" (287). Moreover, Thoreau sees government as being foolish for extolling the idea that material existence is the only thing of consequence. This idea can be seen in his reflection during the night he spent in jail:

I could not but smile to see how industriously they locked the door on my meditations, which followed them out again without let or hindrance, and they were really all that was dangerous. As they could not reach me, they had resolved to punish my body; just as boys, if they cannot come at some person against whom they have a spite, will abuse his dog. I saw that the State was half-witted, that it was as timid as a lone woman with her silver spoons, and that it did not know its friends from its foes, and I lost all my remaining respect for it, and pitied it. (293)

Government, to Thoreau, only impedes the healthy growth of individuals by exemplifying foolishness and punishing those who seek to live their own lives.

Nor does Thoreau feel that the educational system is conducive to the production of individuals. Thoreau holds that the problem with the system is that the students are educated incompletely: what students learn is neither complete nor immediately pertinent to their individual lives. Students often learn how to study and evaluate life rather than live it for themselves. Thoreau thinks students “should not *play* life, or *study* it merely, while the community supports them at this expensive game, but earnestly *live* it from beginning to end. How could youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living?” (39). Rather than shutting students up in a building and giving them so much work that they must focus exclusively on assignments, they should be allowed the time to experience how their lessons fit into their own lives and those of their fellow students. Furthermore, students are pushed to specialize early on and are then taught things without being taught to relate them to the whole of their lives. One cannot be taught or shown the complete picture in a classroom or by one discipline. A student, he complains, is made “to study chemistry, and [does] not learn how bread is made, or mechanics, and not learn how it is earned; to discover new satellites to Neptune, and not detect the motes in his eyes, or to what vagabond he is a satellite himself; or to be devoured by the monsters all around him, while contemplating the monsters in a drop of vinegar” (40).

The precise lesson is given to the students without an acknowledgment of the lesson’s application to other areas of their lives. This is the point Thoreau touches on when he writes, “It would really be no small advantage if every college were thus located at the base of a mountain Every visit to its summit would, as it were, generalize the particular information gained below, and subject it to more catholic tests” (*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* 231). This would not only benefit the students, but also aid the teachers as such experiences would undoubtedly stir students to deep contemplation of the importance of their lessons. Thoreau recommends: “It is time we had uncommon schools, that we did not leave off our education when we begin to be men and women. It is time that villages were universities, and their elder inhabitants the fellows of universities, with leisure—if they are indeed so well off—to pursue liberal studies the rest of their lives” (80). This would be a more complete type of education that never claimed to have an end. It would also encourage the evaluation and interpretation of knowledge by individual students, as opposed to the mere acceptance of what they are told and subsequent memorization.

Witnessing the lack of individual direction in his fellow men and women bothers Thoreau, and he writes, “[A]ll disease and failure helps to make me sad and does me evil” (60). Yet he cannot help but see the lack of thought most people in society give to their personal growth. These people do not take the time to see where their materialism will lead them. They fail to anticipate the far-reaching ends of their actions. Thoreau takes a seemingly Aristotelian view and criticizes those who do not subordinate their irrational soul to their rational one.

Thoreau observes that the materialism found in the society of his day, which has increased exponentially since, stunts individual growth. People do all they can for material wealth while ignoring the much more important parts of their lives. Thoreau reflects: “A man, any man, will go considerably out of his way to pick up a silver dollar; but here are the golden words, which the wisest men of antiquity have uttered, and whose worth the wise of every succeeding age have assured us of” and they are left untouched by the general population (76). People seem to ignore the fact that money and material possessions cannot help one live better. Nature too can teach

one to live more happily, for it is conducive to thought. According to Thoreau, it is a storehouse of wisdom and strength, yet most people see it only in terms of the profit it can bring them. Thoreau writes:

Flint's Pond! Such is the poverty of nomenclature. What right had the unclean and stupid farmer, whose farm abutted on this sky water, whose shores he had ruthlessly laid bare, to give his name to it? Some skin-flint, who loved better the reflecting surface of a dollar, or a bright cent, in which he could see his own brazen face; who regarded even the wild ducks which settled in it as trespassers; his fingers grown into crooked and horny talons from the long habit of grasping harpy-like. (134)

Rather than accepting the refreshment and beauty the pond offered as an enrichment of his life, the farmer saw it only as a source or sink of money. Conversely, Thoreau describes a lake as something “looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature” (128). Thoreau wishes that other individuals could see, as he does, the value of true riches: an individual character that brings with it a good life. He explains, “Many a forenoon have I stolen away, preferring to spend thus the most valued part of the day; for I was rich, if not in money, in sunny hours and summer days, and spent them lavishly; nor do I regret that I did not waste more of them in the workshop or the teacher’s desk” (132). People base their lives on material goods, and in doing so neglect their ability to increase the complexity and richness of their lives.

Besides constricting their lives with materialism, people also disregard the ends of their constant push for a flawed conception of security. A contemporary example is the billions of dollars today being spent on researching medicines to lower cholesterol and cause weight loss. In themselves these are not bad things; however, people feel that with these types of medications they will be able to eat all they want and maintain their desired weight without exercise. In reality, humans cannot live healthy lives without exercise and good nutrition. As Thoreau writes, “Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end” (40). Many people allow their desires to determine the course of their lives, and in so doing prevent themselves from leading full and healthy lives. Thoreau believes people should spend more time examining their desires. Like Aristotle, he suggests that people should pursue only those desires that still seem worthwhile after thought is given to them. Then they would realize with Thoreau, “What after all does the practicalness of life amount to? The things immediate to be done are very trivial. I could postpone them all to hear this locust sing” (*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* 170).

Thoreau is well known for his ability to practice what he preaches, and this strengthens his philosophy without alienating his readers. His individualism allows him to take a much more passive mode of reform than do most reformers. It leads him to believe that the best method of reform is to set an overwhelming example that cannot be ignored upon its recognition by others. Rather than simply pointing out faults and presenting abstract ideals to strive for, he provides a real example. He writes that his purpose in writing *Walden* is not “to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up” (61). It is plain that the initiative he has for writing the first chapter of *Walden*, “Economy,” is to give others a blueprint to follow if they desire to begin a similar life. Thoreau thinks it is his responsibility to inform others, through illustration, that there is a better way to live, yet he also acknowledges and accepts the fact that he cannot get through to all people. It is not his purpose to correct everyone else’s lives. He says in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* that the “poet will write for his peers alone. He will remember only that he saw truth and beauty from his position, and expect the time when a vision as broad shall

overlook the same field freely” (426). Thoreau does not force his views upon anyone, even in his writing. He makes his case and wants his readers to make their own judgments. He will not force his readers to do anything their own moralities do not call them to do. He does not “mean to prescribe rules to strong and valiant natures, who will mind their own affairs whether in heaven or hell, and perchance build more magnificently and spend more lavishly than the richest, without ever impoverishing themselves, not knowing how they live” (15). What he does say is simply, “[A]s I love my life, I would side with the light, and let the dark earth roll from under me, calling my mother and brother to follow” (“Slavery in Massachusetts” 26).

One of the most important facets of Thoreau’s work is its organization, for it effectively draws readers into both abstract topics and deep criticisms without estranging them. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* epitomizes this point. This work is arranged in terms of two concepts: time and geographical position. Each of these organizational precepts helps to lead the reader through the work without confusion.

The way in which Thoreau chronicles and follows a time schedule in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* gives the reader a clear idea of what to expect from his writing at any given point in the chapter. The most obvious example of this is Thoreau’s use of days of the week as chapters. His journey starts on the last day of August in 1839, a Saturday, and ends six days later on Friday. This is unmistakably established by Thoreau in the first sentence of the chapter that begins the journey, namely “Saturday”; furthermore, each subsequent chapter covers only a day’s worth of travel and meditation. Every chapter, from Saturday through Friday, begins in the morning and ends at night. Thus the reader has a firm grasp of time: one knows to expect the close of the chapter when night falls and that the following chapter will begin with the succeeding day. Additionally, the reader soon comes to realize that the daytime is reserved for travel that is both physical and mental; the daylight hours are reserved for Thoreau’s meditations and his physical journey along the two rivers. With the commencement of a new day comes a concrete description or history. A little later comes more abstract thinking that lasts through much of the day. Finally, night comes and brings with it talk that is metaphorical and dreamlike. It is in this way that Thoreau is able to create a very normal cycle of awakening, activity, and rest that every reader can follow without confusion.

Thoreau further constructs *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* to adhere to a natural movement between geographical positions. The premise of this work is the journey Thoreau and his brother John took from Concord Massachusetts to the White Mountains in New Hampshire, and a vital part of the work is the physical movement from one place to the next. The literal observations and history of Thoreau’s surroundings given at the start, in the midst, and at the end of each chapter provide the readers with secure ground from which they can venture out to follow Thoreau’s more precarious musings. Yet readers are never left for too long a time in the currents of pure abstraction. They always have solid islands of description or history within sight, because Thoreau intersperses these very wisely among his conceptual reveries. Therefore, even when readers feel lost in a particular stream of thought, they will not necessarily be so for the entire chapter. Thoreau sets up his work so there will be several mainstays in each chapter where readers can gain their footing, both physically and mentally, before the writer continues with other complex topics.

Phrases such as “There are nine hundred and ninety-nine patrons of virtue to one virtuous man” are plentiful in Thoreau’s work, yet he balances them with metaphors of hope to keep readers from becoming totally crestfallen. Thoreau does not mean for his work to be a call for people to surrender to the poor conditions of their current lives. He writes, “Some are dinning in

our ears that we Americans, are intellectual dwarfs compared with the ancients.... But what is that to the purpose? A living dog is better than a dead lion. Shall a man go and hang himself because he belongs to the race of pygmies, and not be the biggest pygmy that he can?" (216). To inspire the reader to improve, Thoreau includes many signs of hope. For example, he writes, "The constant abrasion and decay of our lives makes the soil of our future growth" (*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* 440). Though one may make many mistakes in life, if these are learned from they are still beneficial. He also shows his overarching confidence in the abilities of the individual when he says, "We are still being born, and have as yet but a dim vision of sea and land, sun, moon, and stars" (481). In *Walden*, too, the hope he places in the potential of individuals is displayed to the reader when he writes: "[O]ur human life but dies down to its root, and still puts forth its green blade to eternity" (207). One of the strongest symbols of hope Thoreau offers is at the end of *Walden*. In this work are some of his harshest words. Yet he spent a good deal of time revising it. Therefore, it is important to see that *Walden* ends on such a heartening note. One may not be inspired by the various smaller signs of hope throughout the book, but one cannot help but have one's spirits lifted by the metaphor Thoreau chooses as the culmination of *Walden*:

Everyone has heard the story that has gone the rounds of New England, of a strong and beautiful bug which came out of the dry leaf of an old table of apple-tree wood, which had stood in a farmer's kitchen for sixty years, first in Connecticut, and afterward in Massachusetts,—from an egg deposited in the living tree years earlier still, as appeared by counting the annual layers beyond it; which was heard gnawing out for several weeks, hatched perchance by the heat of an urn. Who [is not] strengthened by hearing of this? Who knows what beautiful and winged life, whose egg has been buried for ages under many concentric layers of woodenness in the dead dry leaf of society, deposited at first in the alburnum of the green and living tree, which has gradually converted into the semblance of its well-seasoned tomb,—heard perchance gnawing out now for many years by the astonished family of man, as they sat round the festive board,—may unexpectedly come forth from amidst society's most trivial and handselled furniture, to enjoy its perfect summer at last! (221).

Metaphors like this serve to moderate Thoreau's otherwise extreme cynicism. They also offer a great deal of hope for the individual's progression through a society that would have him or her become a mere part of the whole. The commonality in almost all these metaphorical symbols of hope, however, is the natural world. As a stark contrast to society, nature is the thing that offers Thoreau hope. As long as the world of plants and animals thrives, there is a place for Thoreau and the virtuous and wise men and women who would come after him, to gain the strength and inspiration they need to contradict a flawed society. He truly believes that "in Wildness is the preservation of the world" ("Walking" 61).

Thoreau's philosophy is one that gives priority to the individual. He argues that it is necessary to evaluate things for oneself, that one should not accept things solely on the authority of others. These beliefs often lead him to come down hard on both the government and educational systems of his day, systems still much the same today. He also writes many sarcastic commentaries on the conformity toward which materialism and unchecked desires lead people. In all his writing are the high ideals to which Thoreau holds himself. Despite these cutting critiques and lofty goals, when I read Thoreau today, in a society that has mostly deteriorated by his standards, I do not feel confused or depressed. His approach to reform inspires rather than accuses me, his organization of his writing allows me to easily follow along with even his most

abstract assertions, and his metaphors of hope further motivate me towards change. I think that without his distinctive literary style his philosophy would not be as widely read as it is, nor would its points be as strong. His style allows individuals to recognize in his philosophy the thoughts of another real individual who calls them, not to merely read and accept his harsh words, but to live according to their own dictates in an attempt to live well.

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