
Overview of the Civil Disobedience by Henry Thoreau

Henry Thoreau- Civil Disobedience

Pre-reading Questions

Thoreau thinks that the most ethical and moral government is one that does not exist. Thoreau believes “that government is best which governs not at all”. Thoreau believes it is up to the people to become moral and ethical without the government is not weighing down people. He writes Civil Disobedience to say how it is a person’s duty to not be controlled by the government if their morals do not support what the government does.

According to Thoreau, a citizen has no responsibility to support its government when the government does wrong. Thoreau wants the people of the nation to stand up to what is right and take action against the government. Thoreau asserts that man should not be associated with actions that are wrong or should not support the same action. He claims people must “wash their hands” of the injustices the government partakes in.

Thoreau dealt with the unjust laws that were immoral by not paying his taxes. Thoreau robustly believes that not fighting in a war but paying the tax to support the war is not morally correct. Thoreau spent his time in prison because he would rather spend his time in jail than to spend his money to support the invasion onto Mexican soil.

Questions for Critical Reading

Thoreau’s intended audience would not have agreed with him because of what he speaks to do. Thoreau has strong moral values which cause unrest to people listening to the advice Thoreau suggests. Thoreau has radical ideas for his time in order to stop the injustices of the government and people would not be willing to go to jail for not paying their taxes. However, people who read Thoreau’s work might be enticed to agree with him.

Thoreau asserts the relationship of justice to the moral value is that no man should do justice for a wrong, or do follow in with the wrong morals. He believes people should try to keep their hands clean when it comes to

Thoreau learns that the state is weak and he gained a new view of his town. He learns that the ethics the government uses is wrong as they are only physically stronger than Thoreau is. The

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government should be scared of his thoughts as they are the ideas that can harm the government. He ultimately learns that the government is weak and learns nothing at all. He describes the experience as doing an errand uninterrupted from the start of his imprisonment to the end of his release.

The use of irony in the piece makes Thoreau's argument stronger because of how he uses it to make the government seem weaker and useless. Thoreau writes "It has not the vitality and force of a single living man; for a single man can bend it to his will." Thoreau talks about the government not having the power and force of one man because one man can bend the government as he sees fit. Thoreau emphasizes that the government cannot change itself making itself having no real power. The next use of irony Thoreau uses "It is a sort of wooden gun to the people themselves" meaning the government has a gun over the people but it is wooden which means it has no real power to control the people as it has no threat to them.

According to Thoreau, the ethical responsibility for a government to do upon the minority is to help them out because of the needs they have. Thoreau advises government officials to remove themselves from office. He claims the men who serve the government are machines with no conscious or judgment of a moral sense. These men who are machines think with their head but also without a moral sense. The government should not listen to the majority of people as they can lead to horrendous actions such as what happened to the exile of Copernicus, or crucifixion of Christ, or Luther.

Thoreau has an apparent view when it comes to ethics and morality. He strongly asserts that when the government does a wrong and unjust action then it is the duty of the citizen to not allow him or herself to be supporting the unjust actions. Thoreau's most convincing method for me is when he emphasizes he does not want to pay his taxes that directly supports the war and would rather go to jail. He does this knowing the tax is funding the Mexican War. He would rather see his tax dollars going toward education. He uses his own experience and leads by example which is the most convincing factor.

Calendar Questions

When Thoreau states "All voting is a sort of gaming" he tries to tell us that voting does not really matter as it is up to the majority of people and if you are not a part of their game you are not going to win. If the law is just, then Thoreau believes that a wise man would not leave justice to chance of the majority. Sadly, it is the truth that voting is just a game. In the presidential election, the only vote that matter for the presidency is the Electoral College, for the popular does not count for voting in a new president

The gaming aspect of voting is how the voter is usually left with two options to choose from.

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One party will win while the other will lose. It is games because the Electoral College is a winner take all system and to win it, politicians must play the game. Winning the game takes knowledge in how to win. Win the big states or the small states and or a mixture of the two is how you win the game. Politian's know this and that is how they campaign in order to win the game. Thoreau is harsh about voting because voting is all about chance on the majority. Justice should not be based on chance but on to the people who know that things are morally wrong so, they can stop it. For Thoreau, voting makes humans seem like they have no actual power to stop the injustices that can occur.

Journal Entry

I would have to say that I somewhat agree to some extend of what Thoreau speaks in his work, Civil Disobedience. Thoreau criticizes the government in many ways by mocking its lack of power and its lack of a consciousness. His writing can be ironic at times when he laughs at the government's power of a wooded gun. I do agree with Thoreau that the population should keep their hands clean of the ill actions the government decides to take. I believe Thoreau is right about this because it is the people that give the government its power. It is hard to say if it is worth going to jail for not paying taxes but Thoreau knows it is morally wrong to fund a war as well as fighting in it. Voting can be good and bad as there are different things to vote for. Laws are made for the people and the ones that are enforced are the ones that are going to protect us but, there are some laws that are silly and not needed. We can take for example the law about not drinking and driving. It is not immoral to drink alcohol or drive but it is illegal to do both because it will protect us from being hit by a car. Another example of the law is to not kill people; it is immoral to take someone else's life but is needed. The silly laws can include gay marriage and legalizing marijuana as they both do not directly harm the mass or individuals. It is wrong that gay marriage is not legalized in some states whereas it is in others. Thoreau is a morally just man and his ways may seem radical to some but, ultimately he has many good ideas about the people doing the right thing for those being mistreated.

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