
The Importance of Defending Your Standards as Depicted by Thoreau in Civil Disobedience

Understanding Civil Disobedience

We all encounter at least one instance in our lives when we are told to do something that seems to go against our moral code. Unfortunately for most of us, we will end up doing these things due to some authoritative figure or severe consequence. But, what are the implications of standing up for your morals? This is what Thoreau seeks to answer in his essay Civil Disobedience. The following paper is aiming to answer this question with correlation to what Thoreau has said about civil disobedience.

This seems to be a question with another inquiry hidden within it. That is, to what level is your personal integrity? Of course everyone opposes some of the things they are asked to do, but still end up doing them. If your morals and beliefs are so strong, you should have no problem opposing a figure that requires you to go against them. Then again, perhaps this is an ideal hope.

Thoreau believes that each man should stand up for his beliefs in a passive way. However, he states, "Even voting for the right is doing nothing for it" (Thoreau 673). Accordingly, we must take a stand in something in order to disagree with it. If we are opposed to animal cruelty, stop eating fast food. If we do not support the present war, put the flags away. Sitting around and simply saying you are against something is nearly as bad as partaking in it. Thoreau also writes, "He who gives himself entirely to his fellow-men appears to them useless and selfish; but he who gives himself partially to them is pronounced a benefactor and philanthropist" (Thoreau 670). This represents firmly Thoreau's beliefs on conformity. A man who indulges in the ideas of others and casts his own aside is a fool; a man who understands the ideas of others and procures his own as a result is truly wise. Thoreau believes that man has the ability to create a wondrous civilization, but we all have to do it by our individual means.

These ideas of civil disobedience are interesting concepts to wrestle with. Every person at a time thinks to their self "What if I just don't?" Perhaps, we should all answer this question and take the consequences as they come. As long as our civil disagreements are within the realms of modern morals we should only serve a few years jail time at worst. Thoreau believes this is the best thing that could happen, actually. In fact, this would bring us closer to ourselves in order to become connected with our own inner genius. Of course, most people believe that family is more important than their opinions, so this rarely happens.

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So now the question becomes: What is more important, family or values? Now of course many will say family and values are the same thing, but, for purposes of the point, only regard personal values excluding value of family. Each person has a tendency to stay strong to their values and follow them in every instance of life. However, once a person forms an intimate relationship, or family, their values may have to shift. In some cases, one person's values will have to completely flip just because they went into a relationship. This question seems apparent at first glance, that is, many people would agree family is more important, but Thoreau would say a true family would love you the same, if not more, for staying strong to your values. Family is a result of values, since most relationships are built on similarities.

I have had a few personal experiences with civil disobedience; most of which involve owing money to something. The first to come to thought is a debt I owe to Gumberg Library. Two semesters ago I checked out a couple DVD's and did not return them in time. However, for whatever reason, I was charged late fees. It has been almost a full year since I have checked anything out from Gumberg Library due to this. Yes, it may only be two dollars, but its two dollars that are not owed to Gumberg. The consequences of this are obvious. I cannot get anything out of the library until the debt is under two dollars. I have to give them one penny! I will not though.

This has nothing to do with money. By no means am I a hoarder of my cash. It is the fact that they are requesting money that I should not owe to them. If I was not so certain that I turned the DVD's in on time, Gumberg would have my two dollars and probably see my face more often than twice a week to print my argument outline. Now, Thoreau probably would be disappointed in me when I decide that a degree is more important than two dollars, but I will had held out for some time nonetheless.

This is the problem that most people will have with civil disobediences. We will spend too much time basking in the consequences that it will actually hinder our lives. Thoreau wants no one to bail us out from our consequences, including ourselves. But again, another question arises. That is, is the strength and will of a single value more important than the succession of a fulfilled life? In most cases, man is shot down for standing out. It is a disgrace, but it seems that change is civilization's worst enemy. The average civilization does not want change. Unfortunately, civilization is also built on change. This is very circular, I know. This emphasizes what Thoreau is trying to get at in a new light however.

Perhaps Thoreau is suggesting that we see if we are strong enough to be the needle amongst thumb tacks, and to show that our idea of change is such an invaluable concept, that the life we are living is nothing compared to the many lives we singularly can improve by being the example, the memory, and the change.

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