

[Professor Name]

[Course Name]

Civil Obedience

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Introduction

Thoreau's *Civil Obedience* was a call to the government for improvement rather than abolishing the government as many people saw it. Transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau quoted, "I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government." The direction of this improvement points toward a belief that government and laws are not necessary. Thoreau stated, 'That government is best which governs not at all;' and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have." He argued that it is an individual's duty to avoid allowing the government to make them agents of injustice. (Thoreau, 2009) Thoreau, unlike many of his contemporaries during his time, began to debate that the government should not persecute the individual for making decisions based on his own moral decisions that were not influenced by the government. He also attested that even if the individual's moral decisions did not agree with that of the government, it is still a right in which the government should respect. *The Resistance to Civil Government* influenced change in American history and became a part of American identity.

Early Life and Notoriety

Henry David Thoreau was born on July 12, 1817 in Concord, Massachusetts. He was an American author, poet, philosopher and historian born to David Henry Thoreau to John Thoreau, a pencil maker and Cynthia Dunbar. He did not begin to use the name Henry David until after college in which his name was legally changed. He received his education at the public school in Concord and he attended the private Concord Academy. Proving to be a better scholar than his more fun-loving and popular elder brother John, he was sent to Harvard. (Thoreau 2004)

Thoreau's graduation came at an inauspicious time. In 1837, America was experiencing an economic depression and jobs were not plentiful. Furthermore, Thoreau found himself temperamentally unsuited for three of the four usual professions open to Harvard graduates: the ministry, the law, and medicine. Thoreau received his formal education from Harvard College where he studied math, science, rhetoric, and philosophy between 1833 and 1837. Despite having to drop out for several months due to financial and health problems, he was still able to graduate top of his class in 1837. One of his most famous quotes is "Let sheep keep their own skin". Thoreau fully supported the individuality of each person.

Thoreau is best known for his book entitled *Walden*, which is a reflection of simple living in natural surroundings and his essay, *Resistance to Civil Government* (also known as *Civil Disobedience*), an argument to an unjust state of government. But Thoreau's historical essay was more of a suggestion rather

than completely discrediting the entire government. He was motivated to write this essay partly due to his disgust with slavery and the Mexican-American War.

Civil Disobedience

The essay, Civil Disobedience was published in an anthology called *Esthetic Papers*. In his 1849 essay, Thoreau details that government typically more harmful than helpful and therefore cannot be justified. According to Thoreau, the government was too corrupt or unjust to otherwise do important work. In fact, Thoreau believed that government to be the agent of corrupt and injustice. Because of this, Thoreau believed that honest men would soon rebel and revolutionize. Thoreau tells people in his essay that you shouldn't just not to wait for the opportunity to vote for justice, but voting justice is in effective as wishing for justice; what you need to do is actually be just. This wasn't a call to dedicate your life to fighting for justice but you do have an obligation not to commit injustice and not support it. Thoreau called for a peaceful revolution, in which he urged people to completely withdraw support of the government and stop paying taxes, even if this means courting imprisonment. Thoreau lived a modest life, so that he has less to lose, stating "I can afford to refuse allegiance to Massachusetts. It costs me less in every sense to incur the penalty of dido devised to the State than it would to obey. I should feel as if I were with less than that case". (Thoreau, 2004)

Thoreau's Opposition to Government Laws and Taxes

Thoreau wasn't opposed to laws and the government in general but to those that enabled the individual to function with a good conscience – for example, the laws of slavery. He wanted to note that just because we were members of a society doesn't mean we have to agree with the laws imposed upon us, especially if those laws lack morality and are deemed inequitable. It is important to understand that Thoreau was not anti-government; he was for a better more improved government. Thoreau wanted the government to understand that the mortality and conscience of the individual must be decided by his or herself and not by the majority of the government. (Yarborough, 2015)

Because his contemporaries did not see him as a theorist, Thoreau's political writings had little importance during his lifetime. His ideas were either ignored or dismissed by his contemporaries including *Civil Obedience*. Nonetheless, his writings went on to influence many American leaders such as United States President John F. Kennedy, civil rights activist Dr. Martin Luther King, and United States Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas. Russian author, Leo Tolstoy even spoke about being influenced by Thoreau's work. (Thoreau, 2009)

Influence

Thoreau's theory on civil disobedience has had a huge influence on modern America and was used as inspiration to model leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi. The political and social impact *Civil Disobedience* created was far more wide reaching than most people understand.

Known for being non-violent and peaceful people, both Dr. Martin Luther King and Gandhi's ideas were clearly Thoreavian in nature. Dr. Martin Luther King noted in his autobiography that his first encounter with the ideas on non-violent resistance came from Thoreau. He quoted, "Here is this courageous New Englander's refusal to pay taxes and his choice of jail rather than support a war that would spread slavery's terrorist into Mexico, I made my first contact with the theory of nonviolent resistance." He went on to say how no other person had been more eloquent and passionate with the moral obligation as good with cooperation than Thoreau. (Kritzberg, 545) And similar to Thoreau, Gandhi was constantly seeking higher truth with regard to the relationship of man and the universe.

Legacy

"How many a man has dated his life from reading a book", Thoreau wrote in his book, *Walden*. (Thoreau, 2004) Little did he know the legacy his books and essay would leave behind. Today, his work has inspired millions of readers nationwide. He sharing his messages and stories influenced navy conservationists, writers, philosophers, activists and individuals from all professions. Today, Henry David Thoreau is considered one of America's greatest intellects and writers for the conservation moment. His legacy and influenced cannot be matched.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Thoreau's opposition to the government influenced so many people. Had Thoreau not expressed his disdain for the government in a peaceful

way, leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King would not have been able to find inspiration to oppose the government in their injustice such as Jim Crow laws and other injustices, which sparked the Civil Rights Movement. Also, Gandhi used Thoreau as a peaceful call to injustice. Thoreau's teaching assessed that evil must be resisted and that no moral man can patiently adjust to injustice. He encouraged people to exercise their rights and to stand up in the name of a cause. Though Thoreau died not known to virtually anyone in the larger world during his time, today his insights are still very influential and legendary.

Works Cited

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