Civil Disobedience By Thoreau Essay, Research Paper

Philosophers, historians, authors, and politicians have spent centuries

pondering the relationship between citizens and their government. It is a

question that has as many considerations as there are forms of government and it

is rarely answered satisfactorily. A relatively modern theorist, author Henry

Thoreau, introduced an idea of man as an individual, rather than a subject, by

thoroughly describing the way a citizen should live many of his works. He

indirectly supplements the arguments he presents in his essay Civil Disobedience

through a comprehensive selection of adages found in his other works. In

particular, the phrases "A simple and independent mind does not toil at the

bidding of any prince" and "To be awake is to be alive. I have never

met a man who is quite awake" support many of the arguments in Civil

Disobedience because they help to explicate the complex ideas Thoreau presents.

The phrase "A simple and independent mind does not toil at the bidding of

any prince" regards the responsibilities of a man to his own

consciousness?it is a duty that can not be revoked by any form of tyrant.

Rather than hinting at a type of anarchy, this statement merely describes each

man?s duty to performing justice in all his actions. This does not refer to

any "man?s duty? to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the

most enormous wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him;

but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no

thought longer, not to give it practically his support" (681). The term

"simple" does not refer to an underdeveloped sense of morality; it

describes a state of mind in which the concept of justice is so defined that

contradictions cannot exist. To toil, as it is presented in this quotation,

means to sacrifice ideals for the sake of conformity or law. The only real power

the State holds over any individual is the promise of brute force; it

"never intentionally confronts a man?s sense, intellectual or moral, but

only his body, his senses" (687). Therefore, many acts the State requires

will be unjust?they can and will force a man to slave for the sake of an

ordeal he does not believe in. As Thoreau notes in Civil Disobedience, "a

wise man will only be useful as a man" (678). In essence, Thoreau believes

that a man who toils at any ruling institution?s bidding simply because it bid

him to do so sacrifices his own facilities as a human being. He then becomes

nothing more than a man put "on a level with wood and earth and stones?

Command[ing] no more respect than men of straw, or a lump of dirt" (678).

Another quotation that helps to explicate Thoreau?s Civil Disobedience is

"To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite

awake." In this phrase, Thoreau uses the term "awake" as an

euphemism for being fully aware of one?s concept of right and fully in control

of one?s moral and physical existence. Understandably, people who are

consistently awake, in this sense of the word, are hard to find: "There are

nine hundred and ninety-nine patrons of virtue to one virtuous man" (680).

Also, the fact that Thoreau has "never met a man who was quite awake"

implies that fully conscious individuals have difficulty existing in modern

society. In fact, Thoreau believes that "no man with a genius for

legislation has appeared in America. They are rare in the history of the

world" (692). Perhaps, by the word "awake," and its equation with

"alive," Thoreau is also referring to the ability to fulfill his own

mission: "I came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to

live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad" (683). Although this concept

is not a particularly unique one, it is nearly impossible to fulfill

completely?but to fulfill it partially is useless. As a living being, one must

"cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole

influence" (684). To truly be alive, one must be consciously satisfied with

every passing moment. Through his conscientious support of every facet of his

philosophy, Thoreau effectively proves his statements regarding citizenship and

government. He remains consistent to nearly every idea he presents and therefore

surrounds them with a seriousness that cannot be ignored.

Thoreau, Henry. "Civil Disobedience." Elements of Argument: A text

and Reader. Ed. Annette T. Rottenberg. 6th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s,

2000. 463-466.