

Henry David Thoreau and the Philosophy of Civil Disobedience as a Non-Catalytic Cum Catalytic Model for Conflict Resolution

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ABSTRACT

This work with the title “Henry David Thoreau and the Philosophy of Civil Disobedience as a non-catalytic and catalytic Model for Conflict Resolution” is anchored on the thesis which asserts that non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as cooperation with good. The research problem which this paper focuses on is to unravel how Thoreau exemplified the philosophy of civil disobedience. The major objective of this essay is to expose the essential definitive elements of the philosophy of civil disobedience. Consequently, this research employs the philosophical tools of exposition, analysis and criticism in its discourse of the subject matter. The research establishes that commitment to civil disobedience as a measure of conflict resolution must be activated from a conscience that is abrasive and nonconformist to evil. The conscience constitutes the highest law and obedience to its dictates confers authenticity on the human being as an indivisible moral entity. Every act of civil disobedience is targeted at disobeying unjust and oppressive laws and or social systems. It is a form of rebellion which calls for active noncompliance to the unjust system. Though most intellectuals affirm that non-violence must be a fundamental element in every act of civil disobedience, Thoreau views the deployment of violence in overcoming injustice as a complementary element of civil disobedience. The use of violence as means to undo evil in the society is however a last resort in Thoreau’s scheme. It is this infusion of violence in the act of civil disobedience which appears to make Thoreau’s thought clash with the logic of consistency since civil disobedience is mostly acclaimed to be a non-violent act of resistance to evil. In submission, it can be gleaned that Thoreau advocated for non-violent civil disobedience only when the oppressive and unjust system is non-recalcitrant to change and transformation. However, when the evil system is totally opposed to change, then Thoreau would subscribe to the employment of a catalytic means to resist the evil system.

Keywords- Thoreau, Civil Disobedience, Non-violence, Resistance, Violence, Evil, Unjust.

I. INTRODUCTION

Henry David Thoreau was born as a third child on the 12th July, 1817 to Mr. John Thoreau and Mrs. Cynthia Dunbar in the town of Concord. John Thoreau formerly a merchant switched to the trade of pencil making from which he gained distinction and derived a successful livelihood. The town called Concord, was at the time of Henry Thoreau’s boyhood, the metropolitan heart of a township of about two thousand inhabitants and served as an ancient settlement of the Indians under the name of Musketaquid. This settlement was later bought over by the Massachusetts colony and the peaceful settlement arising from this contact warranted the name the area bore, Concord. The town was mainly an agro-based economy with farmers living in homesteads, however, there was a steady spreading of other forms of business. This natural residential habitat was complemented by a natural social equality in which the extremities of wealth and poverty were unusual with citizens displaying honesty and non-ostentatiousness. Intellectually, Concord esteemed literature and learning and such other intellectual inheritances were preserved by the non-ostentatious frugal prevailing economic practice which made Concord antiseptic and anti-catalytic to the social harbingers of evil-luxury and destitution.

It was in this environ of vivacious neutrality that Henry was groomed and grew. The reminiscence of his childhood's natural surroundings came during his visit to Walden Pond, a scenic and exciting natural environment, which culminated in his desire to live there and on which he titled his book, *Walden*. Thoreau was laconic in speech, austere in character and liberatious in spirit. His person was a blend of his father's stolid, taciturn pencil-maker traits and his mother's free-enterprising spirit which impelled her to join in the agitation for the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts and even offered her house at Concord as a rendezvous for abolitionist planners.

Thoreau's academic career started in the Academy of Concord. In 1833, at the age of sixteen, he was admitted to Harvard University. His University years and vacations were marked by intermittent teaching service in several country towns, for pecuniary reward for upkeep at school and in one of such vacations in his sophomore year he studied Germany under minister Brownson while teaching at Brownson's school. At Harvard where he took courses in rhetoric, classics, philosophy, mathematics and science, his sojourn registered no single pronounced excellent academic accolade. Later in life, Thoreau derived his intellectual inspiration from the Transcendentalist movement which was prevailing in New England. Transcendentalism was a loose and eclectic idealist philosophy advocated by Emerson, Fuller and Alcott. They held that an ideal spiritual state transcends, or goes beyond, the physical and empirical, and that one achieves that insight via personal intuition rather than religious doctrine. Their view on nature is well expressed in Waldo Emerson's view that "nature has a sanctity which shames our religion" (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "Henry David Thoreau").

His naturalist inclinations propelled him to move to a small self-built hut on a land paid for by Emerson which was surrounded by forest around the shores of Walden Pond. He stayed here for two years two months and two days until his arrest by Sam Staples for refusal to pay six years of delinquent poll tax.

Transcendentalism had an indelible imprint in Thoreau's formation as a conscientious objector. Elizabeth Witherell and Elizabeth Dubrulle ("Life and Times of Henry David Thoreau") aver that a belief in the reliability of the human conscience was a fundamental transcendentalist principle. Such belief was based on their conviction of the immanence, or indwelling of conscience in the individual's soul. It served as the rationale for Thoreau's assertion that "The only obligation which I have a right to assume, is to do at any time what I think right" and it also upheld his naturalist inclinations.

Thoreau has a remarkable influence on advocates and non-violence luminaries such as Leo Tolstoy, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and Martin Buber etc. The Indian independence leader, Mohandas Gandhi (Mahatma Gandhi) credited him as:

... a great writer, philosopher, poet, and practical man, that is, he taught nothing he was not prepared in himself. He was one of the greatest and most moral men America has produced. At the time of the abolition of slavery movement, he wrote his famous essay "On the duty of Civil Disobedience". He went to gaol for the sake of his principles and suffering humanity. His essay has, therefore, been sanctified by suffering moreover, it is written for all time. Its incisive logic is unanswerable ("For Passive Resisters" <http://en.m.wikipedia.org/w/index.php>).

Martin Luther King, an American non-violence apostle and civil rights activists commends Thoreau thus: During my student days I read Henry David Thoreau's essay On Civil Disobedience for the first time. Here, in this courageous New Englander's refusal to pay his taxes and his choice of jail rather than support a war that would spread slavery's territory into Mexico I made my first contact with the theory of non-violent resistance. Fascinated by the idea of refusing to cooperate with an evil system, I was so deeply moved that I reread the work several times. I became convinced that noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. No other person has been more eloquent and passionate in getting this idea across than Henry David Thoreau. As a result of his writing and personal witness, we are the heirs of a legacy of creative protest... these are outgrowths of Thoreau's insistence that evil must be resisted and that no moral man can patiently adjust to injustice ("The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr." <http://en.m.wikipedia.org/civil-Disobedence>).

Also, many in the group of conscientious objectors, anarchists and abolitionists credit him as their inspirer. On the whole, Thoreau is viewed as an author of two books and many poems, naturalist, transcendentalist, tax resister, development critic etc.

II. THOREAU'S MODEL OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION: CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE OR CONSCIENTIOUS RESISTANCE TO GOVERNMENT

Thoreau is chronicled as the first modern mind to systematically reflect on the moral dimensions of disobeying unjust laws and oppressive civil government ("For the Defense of Human Rights: of Civil Disobedience and non-violence", <http://almariamfor.thedefense.blogspot.com>). Hugo A Bedau in his "On Civil Disobedience" (246 – 254) attempts to analyze the concept of *Civil Disobedience* by instantiating the core fundamentals, among others, that constitute civil disobedience thus:

a. **Illegality:** Civil disobedience is an act of dissent committed by violating some positive laws, decisions or policies of government because of their objectionable nature.

b. **Public:** Civil disobedience must necessarily have a public, overt and exoteric nature for it to pass as a civil act. Thus, it is essential for the purpose of civil disobedience that both the public and the government be informed of the intention of the dissenter.

c. **Non-Violence:** By committing civil disobedience, the agent must not engage in violence, nor respond with violence or violent resistance in the event of the disobedience, despite provocation and must be willing to suffer the indignities and brutalities meted to him in the course of the disobedience. Consequently, Hugo defines civil disobedience, in tandem with his analysis thus: “Anyone commits an act of civil disobedience if and only if he acts illegally, publicly, nonviolently, and conscientiously with the intent to frustrate (one of) the laws, policies or decisions of his government” (251).

Civil disobedience therefore is a form of principled or philosophical non-violence which asserts that injustice and the perpetrators of injustice must be overcome only through non-violent actions with particular emphasis on love and redemptive suffering. Basically therefore, resistance to injustice through a non-violent means is constitutive of civil disobedience and is a formidable means of resolving conflict between parties or between person(s) and government. The factual history of Thoreau’s resistance to civil resistance is traceable to 1840, when Thoreau stopped paying the first parish church tax on the ground that he did not see “... why the school master should be taxed to support the priest, and not the priest the school master... I did not see why the Lyceum should not present its tax-bill, and have the state to back its demand as well as the church” (*On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*” <http://www.gutenberg.org/txt>).

Thoreau’s second act of civil disobedience and the one that resonates the most started in 1842 when he stopped paying the poll tax and climaxed in July, 24th or 25th of 1846, when Sam Staples arrested Thoreau and imprisoned him for a night over his objection to pay the tax. His sister Maria Thoreau paid the tax and he was released the next day. Thoreau’s responses to his incarceration resulted in his essay, *Resistance to Civil Government* (later changed to *Essay on Civil Disobedience or Duty of Civil Disobedience*). His *raison d’être* for objecting against the tax was that the government of his day was short of his ideal for prosecuting the American Mexican war and encouraging slavery. In Thoreau’s time there was an expressed spirit of imperial expansion called “Manifest Destiny” which avers the idea that it was the destiny of Americans to expand across the continent, civilizing the wilderness and the natives in their adventure. This American expansionism led to the annexation of Texas which ignited a war with Mexico, who also laid claim to the area.

Thoreau believed that humans have a moral duty to resist oppressive and unjust laws and the compunctions of despotic government. His grievance with the American Government over its de facto support of slavery and participation in the war was that these acts were immoral. This incited Thoreau to radically switch from mere passive resistance to active resistance of immoral policies. Thoreau thus avers:

When a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army and subjected to military law, I think it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize (*On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*, Online project Gutenberg E book).

This call for rebellion and revolution against unjust system is predicated on the premise of his belief that men and women should be guided by their consciences. He views the conscience as superior to any government legislation. The humanity and worth of men and women are legitimated on their possession of conscience. This view of human nature as distinguished by the possession of conscience made Thoreau to opine that conscience is the most binding authority in determining what is right in the event of conflict between men and states. Men and women therefore have an absolute obligation to their consciences. Considering man’s duty to conscientiously object to unjust laws, he says “I think that we should be men first and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think is right.” (*On The Duty of Civil Disobedience*, online project Gutenberg E book)

Thoreau’s disgust of unjust and oppressive social systems made him to affirm the righteousness of revolutionary violence to overthrow such systems (Manu Ampim “A Different Perspective on the Non-violent Tradition”, <http://L.yimg.com/d/lib/smb/js>) Contrary to Hugo’s fundamental elements of civil disobedience, which holds that civil disobedience must be non-violent, Thoreau views the use of violence to overthrow unjust social systems as complementary rather than antithetical to civil disobedience. Regarding violent revolution as a means of resolving conflict with unjust social systems, he says:

I do not wish to kill nor to be killed, but I can foresee circumstances in which both these things would be by me unavoidable, I know that the mass of my countrymen thinks that the only righteous use that can be made of Sharpe’s rifles and revolvers is to fight duel with them, when we are insulted by other nations, or to hunt Indians, or shoot fugitive slaves with them or the like.... The question is not about the weapon but the spirit in which you use it. (Cited by Manu Ampim, online)

Thoreau’s non-violent philosophy was borne out of his belief that non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as cooperation with good. He views resistance to unjust systems as a useful friction that counter balances the evil of the system. However, when the machine was not yielding to the resistance of the friction, the best option was to do away with the machine, hence Thoreau holds that “government is best which governs not at all”. Thoreau calls for revolution only when the existing government is recalcitrant to peaceful change.

III. CRITICISMS

There is a clash of logic in Thoreau's conflict resolution model. This is evident in his advocate of non-violence on the one hand and his defense of violence on the other. There is evidence of an apparent inconsistency in Thoreau's model. Substantially, Thoreau's opinion that "government is best which governs not at all" is viewed as a form of anarchism. He appears to uphold the view of a troglodyte who is not fit for social existence. When violence is viewed as a forceful violation of order, then it follows logically that any act of non-violence, be it aggression or resistance, is violence in disguise. Viewed differently, Thoreau's advocacy of the employment of both the non-catalytic (non-violent) as well as the catalytic (violent) approaches in civil disobedience is a form of integrativism in peace and conflict resolution methodology (Christopher Alexander Udofia, "Ozumba's Integrativism as a Functional Peace and Conflict Resolution Methodology". *European Journal of Humanities and Educational Achievements (EJHEA)* <https://www.scholarzest.com> Vol. 2 No. 4, April 2021, ISSN: 2660-5589)

IV. CONCLUSION

Conscience is perceived by Thoreau as the only distinctive element that accords man worth. Thus, obedience and allegiance to the biddings of the conscience is superior and must necessarily precede obedience and allegiance to civil laws. In this purview, therefore, Thoreau holds that obedience to one's conscience in the face of civil injustice is a moral obligation which tantamounts to non-cooperation with evil. Evidently, non-cooperation and resistance to unjust laws; viewed as civil disobedience, becomes a cooperation with good. This act of civil disobedience, though ideally ought to be non-violent; as was displayed in Thoreau's non-resistance to his arrest for refusal to pay the pool tax, can assume a violent measure if the tyranny of government is unending and the government is unyielding to change. To this end, Thoreau's philosophy of peace and conflict resolution is modeled on both non-violent and violent approaches.

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