Civil Disobedience by Thoreau

Civil Disobedience Summary and Analysis of Section II

Section II: Resistance to Civil Government

Summary

In the American tradition, men have a recognized and cherished right of revolution. Still, Thoreau has a dismissive attitude toward some of the grievances that have sparked revolts in the past, such as the 1775 protest against tax on foreign goods. From his perspective, slavery outweighs all other causes for revolution both in magnitude and moral gravity. As he points out, one sixth of the population in the United States lives in servitude. A man disgraces himself by associating with a government that treats even some of its citizens unjustly, even if he is not the direct victim of its injustice. Thoreau takes issue with William Paley, an English theologian and philosopher, who argues that any movement of resistance to government must balance the enormity of the grievance to be redressed and the "probability and expense" of redressing it.

Thoreau proceeds to attack those in his native state of Massachusetts who profess to be against slavery in the South while participating in the commerce and agricultural trade that supports it. The only effective and sincere way to express opposition is through concrete deeds and acts of resistance. Anti-slavery sentiment by itself does not exempt someone from the charge of moral complicity. Thoreau turns to the issue of effecting change through democratic means. Voting for politicians opposed to slavery does not in itself qualify as a moral commitment to the abolition of an unjust practice; it simply registers the will of the people that one policy should prevail over another. The position of the majority, however legitimate in democratic terms, is not tantamount to a moral position. The country is full of men who defer to majority opinion and the shortcomings of a political process that offers a limited number of candidates and choices.

Thoreau believes that the real obstacle to reform lies with those who disapprove of the measures of government while tacitly lending it their practical allegiance. At the very least, if an unjust government is not to be directly resisted, a man of true conviction should cease to lend it his indirect support in the form of taxes. Thoreau exhorts his reader to "action from principle" but again weighs the proportionality of the "remedy" (the measures of civil disobedience taken in the name of resistance) to the "evil" (the injustice to be remedied). He concludes that if a specific law of a government makes a man into an "agent of injustice," that law

should be rightfully transgressed and broken regardless of the individual repercussions. Thoreau calls on his fellow citizens to withdraw their support from the government of Massachusetts and risk being thrown in prison for their resistance. Forced to keep all men in prison or abolish slavery, the State would quickly exhaust its resources and choose the latter course of action. In these circumstances, to pay taxes would be to enable the continuation of a government's repressive policies. For Thoreau, out of these acts of conscience flow "a man's real manhood and immortality."

Money is a generally corrupting force because it binds men to the institutions and government responsible for unjust practices and policies, notably the enslavement of black Americans and the pursuit of the war with Mexico. Thoreau sees a paradoxically inverse relationship between money and freedom. The poor man has the greatest liberty to resist because he depends the least on the government for his own welfare and protection. For the "rich man," crudely speaking, the consequences of disobedience often seem too great, either to his property or personal standing in society. Thoreau explains how he has consequently dissociated himself from as many superfluous entanglements in outside institutions as possible, such as the local church.

Analysis

Thoreau faces the difficult philosophical task of circumscribing the legitimate uses of civil disobedience even as he attempts to lay down a rationale for it. While the essay focuses specifically on slavery in the United States, the logic behind civil disobedience could be applied more generally to any number of grievances against government. At the risk of allowing his own argument to be invoked indiscriminately, Thoreau seeks to define in which cases it is justified to resist government, and in which cases the injustice is "part of the necessary friction of the machine of government."

Most importantly, Thoreau rejects the criterion of expediency used by Paley to judge the necessity of rebellion at a given moment in history. Though it may not be convenient to resist, and the personal costs greater than the injustice to be remedied, Thoreau firmly asserts the primacy of individual conscience over collective pragmatism. Civil disobedience does, however, involve at least two restrictions: 1) the means of resistance advocated and practiced by Thoreau are nonviolent (though in later political writings, he appears to change his mind on this matter); 2) the act of resistance should specifically target the injustice to be remedied. Moral objection to a particular law does not authorize nonobservance of all laws.

Some aspects of Thoreau's argument seem anti-democratic on their face, particularly his disregard for majority opinion as expressed through elected representatives. But Thoreau reveals himself to be far more nuanced over the course of the essay. His fundamental respect for democracy and the Constitution coexists with a pervasive cynicism about the integrity of politicians and the voting process, which significantly limits the ability of ordinary citizens to express their will in the first place.

At several points, Thoreau uses mechanical metaphors to describe the functioning of government. To conceive of the State as a machine suggests its dehumanizing effects, especially with regard to the treatment of slaves. These metaphors are also part of a larger dichotomy in Thoreau's thinking between nature and artificial social constructs, such as government, corporations or the church. In the following section, Thoreau refers to a "higher law" derived from nature, and uses a metaphor borrowed from the natural world to justify civil disobedience.

Civil Disobedience Summary and Analysis of Section III

Section III: A Night in Prison

Summary

After refusing to pay the poll tax for six years, Thoreau is thrown into jail for one night. His contemplation of the prison walls leads him to reflect on the split between mind and body. Whereas the State considers physical confinement a form of punishment and assumes that the chief desire of the inmate is to "stand on the other side of that stone wall," Thoreau realizes that the punishment is woefully inadequate and useless in his case, since his thoughts are more threatening to the State than any possible action he could undertake outside of prison. The only advantage of the State is "superior physical strength." Otherwise, it is completely devoid of moral or intellectual authority, and even with its brute force, cannot compel him to think a certain way. Thoreau compares the individual conscience and the State to an acorn and a chestnut that "obey their own laws," and must "live according to its nature" or perish. He proceeds to insert a detailed account of his incarceration:

Thoreau is fascinated with his prison roommate, a man claiming to be wrongly accused of arson. He reads the various tracts and verses left by previous occupants of the cell. That night, looking out from his cell window, Thoreau feels that as though he has traveled to "a far country." Confinement gives Thoreau a strangely novel and intimate view of his hometown and its institutions. He overhears

fragments of conversation in the neighboring tavern and listens to the ringing of town-clock bells, which evoke in him the image of a medieval town. But Thoreau also feels a sense of alienation upon his release from prison. The townspeople, once familiar, now seem foreign to him; neighbors seem to greet him with bewilderment.

Thoreau reiterates the logic behind his refusal to pay the poll tax: while willing to support other activities of government, such as the building of roads and schools, he is unwilling to "abet the injustice to a greater extent than the State requires." Thoreau realistically recognizes that it is impossible to deprive the government of tax dollars for the specific policies that one wishes to oppose. Still, complete payment of his taxes would be tantamount to expressing complete allegiance to the State.

Analysis

Used throughout the essay, the first-person narration lends an especially striking note of authenticity and personal conviction to Thoreau's account of prison. Presumably written earlier as a diary entry, this passage seems to document Thoreau's observations in the moment, and to capture the spontaneity of his imagination and feelings in contrast to the more logical, philosophical mode of writing practiced elsewhere in Civil Disobedience. Instead of presenting another carefully reasoned moral argument that the reader is free to accept or dismiss, Thoreau has chosen here to describe his own experience, whose validity cannot be called into question. As a rhetorical gesture, this passage serves to inoculate Thoreau against the accusation of self-righteousness or moral grandstanding, which he refutes in subsequent paragraphs. It attests to the fact that he has already put his words into action.
In general, first-person narration allows Thoreau to frame a complex and abstract political issue in a voice that personally bears witness to the human effects and consequences of government oppression. It also exposes the reader to Thoreau's own ambivalence and to the ongoing process of self-examination that he encourages his fellow men to undertake in their own conscience. While confident in his conviction that slavery is morally wrong, Thoreau generally avoids dogmatic, authoritative statements in favor of a more tentative, moderate first-person voice. He prefers cautious formulations such as "This, then, is my position at present" over more militant, definitive ones that might alienate or put his reader on the defensive.

In contrast to his repeated comparison of the State to a machine, Thoreau personifies the State "as a lone woman with her silver spoons." He casts

government not as a mechanical agent of injustice but as a feminized object of pity. Thoreau's confrontation with the State proves to him that physical violence is less powerful than individual conscience. Bodies can be contained behind walls, but ideas cannot. During his stay in prison, Thoreau comes to the realization that, far from being a formidable brute force, government is in fact weak and morally pathetic. That he should choose the figure of a woman to make this point reveals an interestingly gendered conception of civil disobedience, given the constant emphasis on the virtues of men in relation to the State, here personified as a woman.

Civil Disobedience Summary and Analysis of Section IV

Section IV: Politicians and the People

Summary

Why submit other people to one's own moral standard? Thoreau meditates at length on this question. While seeing his neighbors as essentially well-intentioned and in some respects undeserving of any moral contempt for their apparent indifference to the State's injustice, Thoreau nonetheless concludes that he has a human relation to his neighbors, and through them, millions of other men. An appeal to their consciences is not altogether futile because these millions of other men are capable of reckoning with themselves and their God over questions of moral importance. Thoreau does not expect his neighbors to conform to his own beliefs, nor does he endeavor to change the nature of men. On the other hand, he refuses to tolerate the status quo.

His objective, moreover, is not to argue or to claim the high moral ground. Despite his stance of civil disobedience on the issues of slavery and the Mexican war, Thoreau claims to have great respect and admiration for the ideals of American government and its institutions. He is not a contrarian for its own sake or unwilling to obey most laws. Thoreau goes further to say that his first instinct has always been conformity. He is not by nature inclined to resist government, which in reality intrudes minimally into his daily thoughts and affairs.

Statesmen, legislators, politicians--in short, any part of the machinery of state bureaucracy--are unable to scrutinize the government that lends them their authority. To speak from within the institution of government is inherently a position of blindness. Thoreau values what these men contribute to society, their pragmatism and their diplomacy, but feels that only someone outside of government can speak the Truth about it. Even the lawyer, with his attentiveness to

the concept of justice, is ultimately taught to think exclusively within the limits of a legal framework and hence to respect the Constitution that endorses slavery. Considerations of moral conscience do not come into play‹ and sometimes are intentionally excluded‹ when a problem is viewed in political or legal terms. Thoreau cites the speech of Daniel Webster, a prominent senator from Massachusetts at the time, who discounts the relevance of moral concerns to the issue of slavery. Webster concludes: "associations formed elsewhere, springing from a feeling of humanity Š have nothing whatever to do with it."

The purest sources of truth are, in Thoreau's view, the Constitution and the Bible. But politicians have never availed themselves of the lessons to be learned from these sacred documents. Confronted with "the much-vexed questions of the day," they have proven themselves incompetent and incapable of writing the most basic laws. "No man with a genius for legislation has appeared in America" Thoreau proclaims with dry understatement. Without the corrective guidance of the people, America would have long ago declined in rank among the nations.

In his last paragraph, Thoreau comes full circle to discussing the authority and reach of government, which derives from the "sanction and consent of the governed." He reasserts the supremacy of the individual in relation to the State, and further insists that democracy is not the last step in the evolution of government, as there is still greater room for the State to recognize the freedom and rights of the individual. Thoreau concludes on a utopic note, saying such a State is one he has imagined "but not yet anywhere seen."

Analysis

At first glance, Thoreau's citation of the New Testament as a source of truth is surprising and unexpected. Until this point, Thoreau has taken a largely secular view of government and even advocated breaking away from any institutionalized form of organized religion. Upon closer examination, it is apparent that Thoreau derives his justification of resistance not only from the historical tradition of revolution in America, but from religious sources as well. Throughout Civil Disobedience, passages from the Bible are referenced and seamlessly integrated into his argument about political dissent and civil disobedience. Thoreau cites Corinthians to emphasize the importance of individual conscience. Later, he quotes from Matthew to underscore his point about government and the corrupting effects of wealth.
Thoreau's allusions to the Bible are imbued with strong romantic and naturalist imagery. The source of truth is a "stream" that "comes trickling into this lake or that pool" from which wise men "drink." Such imagery points to Thoreau's

transcendentalist belief that God is ultimately found within nature. In the final paragraph, Thoreau turns to another organic metaphor: as soon as an individual has been cultivated and "ripened" to the point of maturity, the State should allow him to "drop off" the tree, and to live free and independently. In the same paragraph, Thoreau counterbalances this idealistic vision with a more historical overview of government, commenting on the changing relationship in modern times between people and those who rule and legislate. The momentum of that change has favored greater individualism and autonomy: "The progress from an absolute to a limited monarchy, from a limited monarchy to a democracy, is a progress toward a true respect for the individual." Thoreau's concept of civil disobedience fits into the larger historical narrative of "progress" by empowering the individual to achieve greater freedom and equality for himself and others.