THEMES OF CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

What Is Transcendentalism? Introduction

New England Transcendentalism was a religious, philosophical, and literary movement that began to express itself in New England in the 1830s and continued through the 1840s and 1850s. Although Ralph Waldo Emerson, Amos Bronson Alcott, and others among the Transcendentalists lived to old age in the 1880s and beyond, by about 1860 the energy that had earlier characterized Transcendentalism as a distinct movement had subsided. For several reasons, Transcendentalism is not simple to define. Transcendentalism encompassed complex philosophical and religious ideas. Its tenets were tinged with a certain mysticism, which defies concise explanation. Moreover, significant differences of focus and interpretation existed among the Transcendentalists; these differences complicate generalizations about the movement as a whole.

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About Civil Disobedience

During his stay at Walden Pond (later to become the subject of his published journal Walden, or Life in the Woods), Thoreau spent one night in jail for refusing to pay a poll tax meant to support America's war with Mexico. He composed a letter from jail that he would later integrate into Civil Disobedience, published in 1849 under the title Resistance to Civil Government. (It is interesting to note that the term "civil disobedience" does not appear in the actual essay.) Thoreau's incarceration brought him firsthand knowledge of the coercive and oppressive tactics used by government to compel its citizens into support of immoral and unjust policies. But it also highlighted the importance of individual moral conscience. The experience became the point of departure for Thoreau's much broader reflection on the duty of civil disobedience.
In addition to the war with Mexico, slavery is a chief concern in Thoreau's essay. He extends the logic of his argument about civil disobedience to include any cause that might violate an individual's sense of moral conscience. At the time of publication, the country was deeply divided along regional (and racial) lines over the question of slavery. The New England Anti-Slavery Society had been founded in 1832, and by the 1840s, Boston and the town of Concord where Thoreau lived for most of his life were considered bastions of abolitionist sentiment. Civil Disobedience was first delivered on January 26, 1848 as a lecture at the Concord Lyceum, a center of education for reform-minded thinkers and citizens. While the need for abolition seems morally self-evident by contemporary standards, the issue of slavery in the 1840s and 1850s did not command a unified opinion among many white Americans, even in northern states. Thoreau's essay made it clear that all citizens are morally implicated in the oppression practiced by a government even if indirectly affected by it.

Thoreau's landmark essay has had a profound and well-documented influence on intellectual figures such as the Russian author Leo Tolstoy, Indian peace activist Mohandas Gandhi, black civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., on the British Labor Movement and the American political landscape more generally in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. King's Letter from Birmingham Jail (1963), while containing no direct reference to it, clearly mimics the format of Thoreau's own letter from jail, and relies on the essay's endorsement of civil disobedience as a legitimate response to oppressive government policies.

The right to resistance

Thoreau affirms the absolute right of individuals to withdraw their support from a government whose policies are immoral or unjust. He takes issue with the brand of moral philosophy that weighs the possible consequences of civil disobedience against the seriousness of the injustice. The methods of resistance Thoreau condones in his essay are pacifist and rely principally on economic pressure; for example, withholding taxes in order to drain the State of its resources and hence its ability to continue its unjust policies. The ultimate goal of civil disobedience is not to undermine democracy but to reinforce its core values of liberty and respect for the individual.

Individual conscience and morality

Only an individual can have and exercise a conscience. By definition, both the State and corporations are impersonal, amoral entities that are nonetheless composed of individuals. "It has been truly said, that a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of conscientious men is a corporation with a conscience." An individual has a right and an obligation to "do at any time" what he deems right, to exercise his own conscience by refusing involvement or complicity in a government that enforces unjust policies. Civil disobedience is a necessary expression of individual conscience and morality, an attempt to reconfigure the relationship between the individual and the State by making the latter more equitable and less burdensome in its treatment of the former. While supportive of democratic principles, Thoreau does not believe in settling questions of fundamental moral importance by majority opinion.

Limited government

The most ideal form of government is one which exercises the least power and control over its citizens. Thoreau believes that government is an inherently intrusive force that stifles the creative enterprise of the people. His avowed faith in ordinary citizens stands in contrast to the entrenchment of an elite political class that Thoreau perceives as incompetent and ineffectual. His libertarian leanings are, however, tempered with limited support for some government initiatives, such as public education and highway maintenance. Democracy is not the last stage in the evolution of the State, as there is still greater room to recognize the freedom and rights of the individual. Thoreau pushes this line of thinking to its logical limit by envisioning a society in which government is eliminated altogether because men have the capacity to be self-regulating and independent.

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