



How To Mind Your Own Business: Thoreau on Political Indifference

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Politicians! I have looked into the eyes of two or three of them—
but I saw nothing there to satisfy me—

—Thoreau, *Journal*, 18 June 1854

Be fast rooted withal in your native soil of originality and independence, your virgin mould of unexhausted strength and fertility—Nor suffer yourself ever to be transplanted again into the foreign and ungenial regions of tradition and conformity, or the lean and sandy soils of public opinion.

—Thoreau, from “Reform and the Reformers,”
composed c. 1846–48

AS commentators have long understood, Henry David Thoreau’s radical individualist political philosophy is fundamentally at odds with his intermittent participation in the anti-slavery movement of mid-nineteenth-century New England. Mid-twentieth-century scholars who attempted to account for that discrepancy were largely hostile, with critics like Hannah Arendt and Vincent Buranelli branding Thoreau’s politics a failed brand of egoism or anarchism.¹ Later in that century and early in the present, other analysts have sought to rehabilitate Thoreau’s reputation by arguing that he was an

¹Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Mariner Books, 1972); Heinz Eulau, “Wayside Challenger: Some Thoughts on the Politics of Henry David Thoreau,” in *Thoreau: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Sherman Paul (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962); Vincent Buranelli, “The Case against Thoreau,” *Ethics* 67 (July 1957): 257–68.

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exemplar of liberal democratic individualism, and they have characterized him as bent on cultivating “conscience,” a unifying concept that aligns recent research on his influence as a moral philosopher with his highly selective involvement in political activities. Even among those adhering to this explanation, however, there is little consensus, with one critic calling Thoreau’s approach “militant,”² another “democratic,”³ and a third asserting that Thoreau exhibits “a moral sensitivity and therefore a political irritability that are exceptionally keen.”⁴

Economics, however, may be a more useful context than moral philosophy for reconciling Thoreau’s political thought and with his sporadic political action. Philosophers and ordinary citizens alike struggled to accommodate themselves to the early nineteenth century’s rapid economic transformations, and they did so through such institutions as the state, the church, and social movements. Others, however, chose a principled withdrawal, a stance Thoreau endeavored to articulate and to maintain. In *Walden* he instructs, “Let every one mind his own business.”⁵ This notion of minding one’s own business suggests the ways in which politics and economics intersect and intertwine in Thoreau’s philosophy. The “business” one should mind includes not only the lifelong pursuit of making one’s living but that of cultivating a serene inner self in defiance of one’s neighbors’, and the nation’s, busyness. In this second regard, minding one’s own business can be taken as a declaration of political indifference—that is, of the elective detachment of the self from public matters.

And yet the fact of Thoreau’s political engagement remains. By closely reading his personal writings—private journals and letters to friends, especially Harrison Blake, an acquaintance

²Nancy Rosenblum, “Thoreau’s Militant Conscience,” *Political Theory* 9 (February 1981): 81–110.

³Jack Turner, “Performing Conscience: Thoreau, Political Action, and the Plea for Captain John Brown,” *Political Theory* 33 (2005): 448–71.

⁴George Kateb, *Patriotism and Other Mistakes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 250.

⁵Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 13.

and devotee of Thoreau's thought who received Thoreau's best letters (and, indeed, the best expression of his philosophy)—we can see that even in private, Thoreau was not disengaged from but, rather, attuned to political subjects, albeit in a different register from that of his speeches and public writings. Despite this difference, however, it is evident in both private and public writings that even as Thoreau is compelled by political issues, he is extraordinarily uncomfortable with his attachment to them. Thus, the private journals and letters do not really support or discredit the politically active Thoreau; instead, they highlight his persistent misgivings as well as the terms under which he is willing to participate in political affairs or, alternatively, to retreat once more into his privatist political philosophy.⁶

Minding One's Own Business and Political Indifference

Thoreau's preference for what we might call a "home economics" is a direct response to mid-nineteenth-century America's industrial concept of "business." For Thoreau, the "business" of others includes both the labor performed for them and an undue interest in their concerns, such as newspapers' gossip mongering, quite literally a business of others' business. In an August 1854 letter to Blake, Thoreau reflects on what he considers to be the better course.

Only think, for a moment, of a man about his affairs! How we should respect him! How glorious he would appear! Not working for any corporation, its agent, or president, but fulfilling the end of his being! A man about *his business* would be the cynosure of all eyes.⁷

Minding one's own business is, in Thoreau's view, an antidote to the market revolution, which has radically transformed the lives of the nation's citizens, indebting them to corporations or

⁶Robert Richardson, *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 186–87.

⁷Henry David Thoreau, *Familiar Letters of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. F. B. Sanborn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1894), p. 277.

to other persons with more power than they. As he notes in "Life without Principle," "the world is a place of business."⁸ Denying the virtue of industriousness and elevating personal choice, Thoreau, for his part, values work only insofar as it promotes the well-being of the individual, well-being as the individual himself defines it.

"What!" exclaim a million Irishmen starting up from all the shanties in the land, "is not this railroad which we have built a good thing?" Yes, I answer, *comparatively* good, that is, you might have done worse; but I wish, as you are brothers of mine, that you could have spent your time better than digging in this dirt.⁹

The woeful status of wage laborers prompted a number of American transcendentalists, including Orestes Brownson, Theodore Parker, and, to a lesser degree, Thoreau, to comment on how the process of getting a living was irrevocably changing in nineteenth-century America.¹⁰ Thoreau's *Walden*, particularly the first two chapters, attempts to reclaim the economic and philosophical components of minding one's own business, a task best accomplished, he believes, when the individual withdraws both physically and intellectually from outward circumstances.

Attention to political matters that are not vital to one's own self-interest can also alienate the individual from important personal matters. In a striking late letter to Parker Pillsbury on the subject of the coming Civil War, Thoreau notes:

I do not so much regret the present condition of things in this country (provided I regret it at all), as I do that I ever heard of it. I know of one or two who have this year, for the first time, heard a President's message; but they do not see that this implies a *fall* in themselves, rather than a *rise* in the President.¹¹

⁸Henry David Thoreau, *Reform Papers*, ed. Wendell Glick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 156.

⁹Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 54.

¹⁰Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 525–69; Philip Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), pp. 124–49.

¹¹Thoreau, *Familiar Letters*, p. 438.

By holding himself aloof from politics, Thoreau does not deny that it is an area of expertise the world requires, but he does reject it as a means by which the individual gains vitality. For Thoreau, the self should be engaged in the business of discovering its own interests, its own properties, and his philosophy, to some extent, exhibits both the pleasures and pitfalls of finding one's business and single-mindedly pursuing it.¹²

Although Thoreau seems to cordon off politics as a specialized area, his point is, more accurately, that most individuals should be nurturing their own talents rather than involving themselves in political issues that do not require their attention nor yield to their desires. How, then, should the individual conduct himself? Thoreau offers a suggestion in a famous passage from "Resistance to Civil Government":

As for adopting the ways which the State has provided for remedying the evil, I know not of such ways. They take too much time, and a man's life will be gone. I have other affairs to attend to. 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.¹³

When confronted with the problems of government, each individual must look to his own taste and time to gauge the appropriateness of his participation, and in this instance, Thoreau strips his own political obligations down to the dictates of his mood and circumstances. By choosing to mind his own business, he declines responsibility for society's affairs and suggests that he owes himself (and his society) no further explanation than that reform would "take too much time." Minding his own business is, then, Thoreau's means of simplifying his life and providing an internal check on the external obligations a democracy would seem to impose. Read in this way, "Resistance to Civil Government" is not an anarchic piece, nor is it

¹²The same can be said for Emerson. A striking passage from "Self Reliance" summarizes it well: "Expect me not to show cause why I seek or why I exclude company. Then, again, do not tell me, as a good man did today, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they *my* poor?" (Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alfred Ferguson and Jean Ferguson Carr, 9 vols. [Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1979], 2:30).

¹³Thoreau, *Reform Papers*, p. 74.

necessarily an essay decrying government's involvement in its citizens' lives; it is, first and foremost, a privatist statement of disdain for the ways in which "everyday politics" draws the individual's imagination outward from its properly inward focus.

Thoreau's dismissal of everyday politics is not novel for his time period, nor is it exceptional among his transcendentalist cohort; in fact, one could argue that Emerson and Parker wrote equally powerful denunciations, as did conservative minister Horace Bushnell.¹⁴ What makes Thoreau's defense of political indifference unique is the emphasis he places on the efficacy of the individual's narrowing the scope of his interest, cultivating what lies near, and maintaining that limited focus not simply as a periodic tactic for deflecting unwanted commitments but as a sustained strategy for life. As Thoreau learns (and relearns) to "mind his own business," he makes himself—and his project of getting a living—the paramount concern of his life. He does not dismiss politics altogether; rather, he places a premium on matters closest to hand, those affairs that are, quite literally, his "business."

In a letter to Blake from November 1849, Thoreau explains:

I know little about the affairs of Turkey, but I am sure that I know something about barberries and chestnuts, of which I have collected a store this fall. When I go to see my neighbor, he will formally communicate to me the latest news from Turkey, which he read in yesterday's mail. . . . Why, I would rather talk of the bran, which, unfortunately, was sifted out of my bread this morning, and thrown away. It is a fact which lies nearer to me.¹⁵

Thoreau's remark, in one sense a badly cloaked critique of his friend Emerson, helps us understand the system of valuation he employs in his "home economics."¹⁶ In radicalizing individual

¹⁴Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Political Emerson*, ed. David Robinson (New York: Beacon Press, 2004); Dean Grodzins, *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), pp. 469–72); Daniel Walker Howe, *Making the American Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 182.

¹⁵Thoreau, *Familiar Letters*, p. 211.

¹⁶This letter is one of many representing the growing difference between Emerson's cosmopolitanism and Thoreau's provincialism.

choice, he reduces the costs of egoism; in other words, by assigning the determination of worth to the individual alone, he places the self beyond criticism, thus freeing himself to perform the “experiment” of life without worry or guilt. Noting that “bran” lies nearer to one than global affairs is a way of contrasting the insignificant but personal intricacies of private life with the significant but impersonal affairs of the world. Thoreau values most highly, then, not that which is most “important” but that which is most personal.

The readiest means of focusing the individual on those matters that are vitally important *to him* is simplification, simplification in all its forms—political indifference being but one expression of it: “By simplicity, commonly called poverty, my life is concentrated and so becomes organized.”¹⁷ Offering one response to the busying tendencies of a rapidly advancing society, *Walden* presents a plan for breaking the bonds of complexity.

Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb nail.¹⁸

In Thoreau’s personal accounting, political participation is not vital to *him*, although it might be to the next man or woman.

Whether in nature or in politics, Thoreau sees indifference not as a hollow, negative characteristic but as a positive, useful virtue. In a journal entry from 1851, he describes an incident in which he snatches a toad from the jaws of a snake:

I thought, as the toad jumped leisurely away with his slime-covered hind quarters glistening in the sun, as if I, his deliverer, wished to

¹⁷*Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, ed. Bradford Torrey and F. H. Allen, 14 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 10:246.

¹⁸Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 91.

interrupt his meditations—without a shriek or fainting—I thought what a healthy indifference he manifested.¹⁹

The toad's indifference to the world around it strikes Thoreau as a tremendous benefit, for it allows the creature to live in the world as it comes to him. The main factor separating animal and human is, in Thoreau's estimation, the latter's moral sense, which generally gives him the advantage but not always. "Why always insist that men incline to the moral side of their being?" Thoreau asks. "Our life is not all moral."²⁰ Later he comments:

A wise man is as unconscious of the movements in the body politic as he is of the processes of digestion and the circulation of the blood in the natural body. These processes are *infra*-human.²¹

Not prepared to deny that the workings of politics and society are, in some sense, vital, Thoreau nonetheless suggests that they should, like human digestion, operate below the level of consciousness. Later in the same entry, he notes: "As for society, why should we not meet, not always as dyspeptics, but sometimes as eupeptics."²²

The Challenge to Political Indifference

It is not possible to isolate the precise moment at which Thoreau committed himself to the antislavery movement of his time. His mother and sisters, lifelong antislavery activists, no doubt had been encouraging him to do so. In 1850, Congress had passed the Fugitive Slave Law, which made the North complicit in the institution of slavery by requiring that any slave who had escaped from his master and was subsequently apprehended in a free state be returned to the South. Although

¹⁹Thoreau, *Journal*, 2:243.

²⁰Thoreau, *Journal*, 1:140.

²¹Thoreau, *Journal*, 3:103.

²²Thoreau, *Journal*, 3:103. Thoreau's insistence on our ability to get beyond politics and toward something more substantial to human life echoes Nietzsche's declaration from the preface to *The Anti-Christ*: "You need to be used to living on mountains—to seeing the miserable, ephemeral little gossip of politics and national self-interest *beneath* you. You need to have become indifference. . . . Respect for yourself; love for yourself; an unconditional freedom over yourself."

Thoreau had alluded to antislavery from time to time throughout his literary career and had helped escaped slaves evade capture, the Anthony Burns affair in the summer of 1854 stirred him to action. On 24 May 1854, nineteen-year-old Burns, who had escaped slavery in Richmond, Virginia, and traveled to Boston, where he worked, was apprehended while walking along the city's Court Street. Attempts to free him were unsuccessful and ended in violence. Burns was tried, convicted, and returned to his master. The event, which had the effect of consolidating antislavery sentiment in the commonwealth, apparently concentrated Thoreau's thought and prompted him to speak out at an antislavery rally in July.

In the speech that subsequently became the essay "Slavery in Massachusetts," Thoreau's self-satisfying ethics meets its limit in the public sphere, as he concedes his newfound willingness to become involved in political matters at the same time as he reiterates his reluctance to dedicate himself (or, indeed, much of his time) to their resolution. Although a strong declaration of abolitionist principle, the essay demonstrates the fundamental difference between Thoreau's concept of politics and the politics that the antislavery movement requires. He does not treat slavery per se but, rather, the North's acquiescence to it, which, he insists, violates *his* sovereignty:

I feel that, to some extent, the State has fatally interfered with my lawful business. It has not only interrupted me in my passage through Court street on errands of trade, but it has interrupted me and every man on his onward and upward path, on which he had trusted soon to leave Court street far behind.²³

The assertion that the Fugitive Slave Law's primary crime is its interference with the daily life of a free individual strikes many readers as odd, but the remark captures the essence of Thoreau's temporary engagement with slavery and with politics. Thoreau is alarmed by slavery, to be sure; however, his philosophy of minding his own business dictates that the Fugitive Slave Law (and indeed slavery altogether) must necessarily

²³Thoreau, *Reform Papers*, p. 107.

become a matter of *his* business—that is, that slavery encroach upon him personally, that for him to take an interest in it, it must violate the liberal individualism he hopes to take for granted. As Thoreau mentions toward the end of the essay, “The remembrance of my country spoils my walk.”²⁴ The point bears further emphasis: Thoreau’s impetus to engage with the polity aligns with the ways in which the polity adversely affects *him*, not others.

People have neglected the task of cultivating self-respect, he claims, and relied instead on the surety of public values. Each and every citizen should be engaged in the lifelong pursuit of creating and sustaining his or her personal set of values and should appeal to such institutions as society and government only insofar as they will better the life of the individual according to his or her unique standards. All too often, however, policy becomes a stand-in for morality, and individuals externalize their private opinions by giving them over to the press, whose role as a value-creating machine Thoreau disparages. Burns’s return to slavery, mandated by state and federal law, awakens Thoreau to the larger problem of how each citizen’s indolence has allowed legality to be equated with morality: “will mankind never learn that policy is not morality—that it never secures any moral right, but considers merely what is expedient?”²⁵ Not only does Thoreau separate policy from morality, but he contends that the two spring from different sources. Morality, he explains, is an abiding internal response to the question of how one should live, not a code of conduct enforced by external authority. The moral life comes about through experimentation, through the experience of life as it is lived in the first person. Policy, on the other hand, derives its tenets from mere ease or custom.

Although morality carries much more weight than policy in Thoreau’s scheme of the universe, he does not wholly dismiss politics. Instead, he believes that “the effect of a good government is to make life more valuable,—of a bad one, to

²⁴Thoreau, *Reform Papers*, p. 108.

²⁵Thoreau, *Reform Papers*, p. 104.

make it less valuable.”²⁶ The quotation is key to understanding why slavery serves as a limit case for his brand of political indifference. Thoreau is not an anarchist but a privatist—one who accepts government but does not participate in its workings—who prefers political matters to be “infra-human.” Government is supposed to ensure the well-being of the individual, but whereas most Northerners thought that returning Burns to slavery was immoral, the opinion of the majority in this case did not trump the policy put in place by the state. In acting on the policy it had established, the government failed to make the life of those individuals more valuable and, instead, denigrated their morality.

On 30 October 1859, two weeks following John Brown’s failed assault on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, Thoreau defended the captain’s action to his fellow citizens at Concord. As Jack Turner persuasively argues, Thoreau’s “A Plea for Captain John Brown” should be viewed as a form of political participation,²⁷ but even as he delivers the address, Thoreau removes himself—despite his obvious interest—from fully committing to the issue at the heart of Brown’s crusade: the abolition of slavery. Thoreau’s hyperbolic statements on Brown’s behalf suggest that he is grieving for a friend at the same time as he is shoring up the reputation Brown enjoyed in transcendentalist circles as hero and saint. Beyond that, however, Thoreau declines to embrace the cause that Brown espoused. Toward the end of the essay, he admits—for the second time; he had done so earlier, in “Resistance to Civil Government”—

I do not think it is quite sane for one to spend his whole life in talking or writing about this matter, unless he is continuously inspired, and I have not done so. A man may have other affairs to attend to.²⁸

With this statement, Thoreau defends his wholly partial and temporary involvement with antislavery politics. He does not characterize the “other affairs” in which he may engage, for

²⁶Thoreau, *Reform Papers*, p. 106.

²⁷Turner, “Performing Conscience,” pp. 465–68.

²⁸Thoreau, *Reform Papers*, p. 133.

they are important only to himself and the self alone assigns value to its endeavors. Thoreau chooses to engage with slavery only when it becomes *his* business, and, thus, it becomes the limiting case for his political indifference. That certain people *are* inspired to take on political causes is not a goad to action but, rather, a further justification for him to withdraw his interest, just as he had dismissed philanthropy in *Walden*: “As for Doing-good, that is one of the professions which are full. I have tried it fairly, and . . . am satisfied that it does not agree with my constitution.”²⁹

If, then, we make too much of Thoreau’s temporary “political action” as it is articulated in his speeches about John Brown and Anthony Burns, we risk losing sight of his more comprehensive contribution to an understanding of the role of the individual in a democratic society: the sacrosanct duty of the self is to vitalize that with which it is surrounded.

Indifference to the Business of Others

Thoreau cultivates political indifference in the midst of tremendous political agitation, most prominently over slavery and the Mexican-American War. In “Resistance to Civil Government,” he declares, “The government does not concern me much, and I shall bestow the fewest possible thoughts on it. It is not many moments that I live under a government, even in this world.”³⁰ In his private letters, especially those to Harrison Blake, he describes over and over the detachment he yearns to achieve. In his first letter to Blake, from March 1848, Thoreau explains: “I have no designs on society, or nature, or God. I am simply what I am, or I begin to be that. I live in the present.”³¹ Later, in a letter to Blake in September 1855, he insists, “I have no scheme about it—no designs on men at all,” and again, in December 1856, he stresses that he does “not think much of

²⁹Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 73.

³⁰Thoreau, *Reform Papers*, p. 86.

³¹Thoreau, *Familiar Letters*, p. 196.

America or of politics.”³² Thoreau’s letters to Blake constitute a sort of “inner biography,” which reveals a thinker intensely concerned with the principles of individuality—freedom and simplicity—but unwilling to commit to a political platform, party, or cause.³³

American transcendentalism coincides with the first wave of American reform. From 1815 until 1860, Americans vigorously campaigned against slavery, alcoholism, emergent capitalism, the unfair treatment of women, and other societal ills. In many ways, the two movements were different, but they often shared a common goal as well as a common membership. Orestes Brownson advocated for labor reform; Margaret Fuller grounded women’s rights in feminist philosophy; Theodore Parker crusaded against slavery and impure labor practices; and, one might add, both Emerson and Thoreau made brief forays into the abolitionist movement. Thus, Thoreau has often been branded by association with the early nineteenth century’s “spirit of reform.”³⁴ But he, more than any other in the transcendentalist cohort, resists such a label.

Although a number of transcendentalists were deeply involved with collective living experiments as an avenue toward social reform—from George and Sophia Ripley’s mildly successful Brook Farm to Bronson Alcott and Charles Lane’s failed Fruitlands—and although many more flirted with the idea, Thoreau entertained not a moment of doubt. “As for these communities,” he unambiguously stated, “I think I had rather keep bachelor’s hall in hell than go to board in heaven.”³⁵ Indeed, one could view Thoreau’s retreat to Walden Pond (1845–47) as an individualist response to communitarian living practices. In “Reform and the Reformers,” his critique of the spirit of communitarianism in his time, he writes:

³²Thoreau, *Familiar Letters*, pp. 306, 347.

³³On Thoreau’s letters to Blake as an “inner biography,” see Richardson, *Henry Thoreau*, p. 208.

³⁴One could look at the Princeton University Press edition of Thoreau’s sociopolitical essays, *Reform Papers*, for evidence of this “guilt by association.”

³⁵Quoted in Richardson, *Henry Thoreau*, pp. 100–101.

Most whom I meet in the streets are, so to speak, outward bound, they live out and out. . . . I would fain see them inward bound, retiring in and in, farther and farther every day, and when I inquired for them I should not hear, that they had gone abroad anywhere . . . but that they had withdrawn deeper within the folds of being.³⁶

Reform movements, like politics, draw the individual outside of himself, outside his own business, and into that of others. In short, Thoreau rejects the Kantian notion adopted by many transcendentalists that individuals come to know themselves discursively through a shared moral community.

More often than not, society plays the enemy in Thoreau's thought. For him, insight into how one ought to live in a rapidly industrializing economy comes through individual self-study alone. His privatist response to the challenges of his time is merely the most radically individualist of the transcendentalist theories of self-cultivation, and it carries with it an almost pathological distrust of society's proclaimed values, its politics. As a rule politics, while providing important tools and services for the self, extends the self beyond its own mind toward a world of seductive interest but little inward promise.

Thoreau's cultivation of political indifference stems in part from his lack of faith in the power of reform, especially the collective reform of an individual life. Dismissing the assumption that people improve when they are coerced to do so by their peers, he instead regrets our influence on each other, wishing to place all freedom in the individual. In his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, he describes a chance meeting and, in the process, introduces us to his theory of interpersonal relations:

He was, indeed, as rude as a fabled satyr. But I suffered him to pass for what he was, for why should I quarrel with nature? and was even pleased at the discovery of such a singular natural phenomenon. I dealt with him as if to me all manners were indifferent, and he had a sweet wild way with him.³⁷

³⁶Thoreau, *Reform Papers*, p. 194.

³⁷Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, ed. Carl Hovde, William Howarth, and Elizabeth Hall Witherell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 206.

Our desires for reform prompt us to romanticize our influence on one another, Thoreau understands, and so he strives for a purer relation: to appreciate others in their singularity rather than feebly attempting to normalize them according to his own dictates. Later in *A Week*, he adds: “We must accept one another as we are.”³⁸ In doing so, we value each individual as a unique center of expression and respect his or her appropriate remoteness from us. “They want all of a man but his truth and independence and manhood,” Thoreau complains.³⁹ And as he states succinctly in the late essay “Reform and the Reformers,” “Inward is a direction which no traveler has taken. Inward is the bourne which all travelers seek and from which none desire to return.”⁴⁰

Viewing Thoreau within a reform tradition, scholars have described *Walden* as an American prophecy⁴¹ or a democratic advice manual,⁴² but however flattering, Thoreau would have disdained such characterizations of the book:

I would not have any one adopt *my* mode of living on any account; for, beside that before he has fairly learned it I may have found out another for myself, I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue *his own* way, and not his father’s or his mother’s or his neighbor’s instead.⁴³

In *Walden*, Thoreau defends a particular life as but one among a host of other viable, indeed laudatory, options. Therefore the book is not an instruction manual except in the largest possible sense. As Stanley Cavell explains, “It would be a fair summary

³⁸Thoreau, *A Week*, p. 283. This quotation directly negates Bob Pepperman Taylor’s major thesis that Thoreau’s abiding interest was in a cohesive moral community and that his writings reflect his desire to reform individuals and society along moral lines. See *America’s Bachelor Uncle* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), pp. 55–57.

³⁹Thoreau, *Journal*, 11:329.

⁴⁰Thoreau, *Reform Papers*, p. 193.

⁴¹Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 19–21.

⁴²Brian Walker, “Thoreau on Democratic Cultivation,” *Political Theory* 29 (2001): 160–65; Howe, *Making the American Self*, p. 250.

⁴³Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 71.

of the book's motive to say that it invites us to take an interest in our lives, and shows us how."⁴⁴ Ultimately, however, it is *we ourselves* who must take interest in ourselves, and interest in ourselves properly keeps us vitally separated from the interests of, and an interest in, others. We can wish, desire, or hope to change others—as Thoreau himself hopes from time to time—but we must keep our actions focused on ourselves. Even if we were to achieve all of our political dreams, Thoreau notes, we would be left with the question “What then?”⁴⁵

For Thoreau, indifference is, in essence, a manifestation of pluralism. If we respect ourselves as singular individuals, we will not fight for the rights of others but ignore them because, quite simply, we cannot know what they consider to be their rights, that is, what they value. As he notes, “You may know what a thing costs or is worth to you; you can never know what it costs or is worth to me.”⁴⁶ Thoreau's political indifference is, then, at least in one sense, a response to the strained pluralism of liberal politics, which mandates personal restraint insofar as it legislates recognition of others' individual rights and interests. But Thoreau is unwilling to sacrifice his own hard-won values to the immediate and expedient utility of the public sphere. He would rather ignore his fellow citizen than, to his own detriment, be forced to accommodate his interests to the rights of the other.

Thoreau's argument that pluralism is best achieved through indifference suggests that he distrusts the discursive power of democratic politics. The major instrument for disseminating political information in his time, the newspaper, leaves individuals ill prepared to debate the issues closest to themselves, Thoreau argues, and sharing that external and ineffectual information does little to promote understanding. In fact, he asserts, discursive politics is a kind of “gossip” wherein people indulge themselves in other people's lives at a safe distance, using political knowledge to maintain separation. In that regard, discursive

⁴⁴Cavell, *Senses of Walden*, p. 67.

⁴⁵Thoreau, *A Week*, p. 127.

⁴⁶Thoreau, *Journal*, 11:379–80.

politics becomes a sort of coping mechanism, one Thoreau does not hold in very high esteem. In politics, we either hold fast to ideas that are of no interest to us, or, if we happen to believe passionately in an idea, we feel compelled to fight for its recognition with others who do not understand it, why we might value it, or our own measure of self-importance.

Remarking that “one can never be too vigilant about the narcissism that individualistic societies tend to engender,”⁴⁷ Brian Walker claims that Thoreau is among those democratic advice writers who advocate democratic individuality as a socially and economically progressive ideal and seek to curb its excesses. Thoreau, however, does not support that assertion. “I am not responsible for the successful working of the machinery of society,” he insists.⁴⁸ Not only is he not responsible, he is not at all interested. Indeed, what could be a stronger assertion of that position than “I would not run round a corner to see the world blow up”?⁴⁹ Disinterest in political problems and the individuals who experience them permeates every element of Thoreau’s philosophy, even his definition of helping the poor: “Be sure you give the poor the aid they most need, though it be your example which leaves them far behind.”⁵⁰ While Nancy Rosenblum sees this passage as an exception to “Thoreau’s show of indifference to others,” it is in fact a perfect declaration of it.⁵¹ Thoreau’s dedication to self-reform may have public consequences, but those consequences are not part of his design. The design is, quite simply, to cultivate the self—nothing more, nothing less: “If you aspire to anything better than politics, expect no cooperation from men. They will not further anything good. You must prevail of your own force, as a plant springs and grows by its own vitality.”⁵² Reform will not

⁴⁷Walker, “Thoreau’s Alternative Economics,” p. 45.

⁴⁸Thoreau, *Reform Papers*, p. 81.

⁴⁹Thoreau, *Reform Papers*, p. 170.

⁵⁰Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 75.

⁵¹Nancy Rosenblum, “Thoreau’s Democratic Individualism,” in *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Jack Turner (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2009), p. 21.

⁵²Thoreau, *Journal*, 11:351.

make a better individual of the recipient or the executor and, instead, will drain the inner vitality of each.

In a letter to Blake, Thoreau roundly disavows that he possesses any instinct for reform, any intention of “doing good”:

What a foul subject is this of doing good! instead of minding one’s life, which should be his business; doing good as a dead carcass, which is only fit for manure, instead of as a living man. . . . If I ever *did* a man any good, in their sense, of course it was something exceptional and insignificant compared with the good or evil which I am constantly doing by being what I am.⁵³

Thoreau may commit acts of goodness toward others, just as he may step on their toes or cause them harm. But such effects are merely circumstantial, unintended consequences of his proper attention to his own personal matrix of cares and concerns. Thoreau envisions political participation as a measure of “doing good,” but not according to one’s own dictates. When we consciously do good for others, we are outside of ourselves, alienated and driven by external motivations, quite simply, as he suggests, “dead” to ourselves. The proper posture for the individual in a democratic society is, on the contrary, indifference: he should mind his own business and let others mind theirs.

Conclusion

The current consensus on Thoreau’s political philosophy centers on the term “conscience,” which is interpreted as his abiding sense of responsibility for the polity at large. But conscience, as defined by recent Thoreau scholars, is the application of one’s moral code to the polity at large, an activity he was quick to disavow. Thoreau’s overarching mission of minding his own business, with political indifference being its operative social component, thrives only insofar as the individual declines to reduce himself to the moral claims or projects of his peers or his time.

⁵³Thoreau, *Familiar Letters*, p. 255.

The recently published *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau* (2009) collects sixteen essays on the American individualist, each bent on evaluating his position as a political thinker, a democratic political thinker in particular. Of the sixteen, only one is disapproving (in Henry Jaffa's essay, Thoreau's reputation suffers when posed against the towering example of Lincoln), and only two are ambivalent (Leigh Kathryn Jenco's essay on Thoreau's moral critique of institutionalized democracy and Melissa Lane's comparison of Thoreau to Rousseau).⁵⁴ The remaining essays praise Thoreau as a champion of a healthy form of individuality appropriate to an advancing democracy. George Kateb sets forth Thoreau's legacy as such:

What makes . . . politics of resistance individualist is the presence of conscience, which means, in this context, the courage to stand for what all the advantaged profess but many do not follow. Thoreau, more than any other, has crystallized the sentiments of resistance for the sake of others.⁵⁵

In other words, although Thoreau remained a somewhat ambivalent "reformer," his writings constitute political participation and demonstrate that he was heavily invested in teaching individuals how to live in a democracy.⁵⁶ Such lionization of Thoreau comes at the expense of his contemporaries, some of whom developed a much more thoroughgoing defense of individual liberties with regard to the state. Theodore Parker, in particular, is a better fit for Kateb's laudatory description, and it is Parker, not Thoreau, who fashions himself a prophet of conscience in the sense Stanley Cavell assigns to *Walden*.⁵⁷

Conscience, of course, has a long and important history in American political thought. The Founders identified conscience and prudence as the mind's formative rational powers, a benign

⁵⁴Henry Jaffa, "Thoreau and Lincoln"; Leigh Kathryn Jenco, "Thoreau's Critique of Democracy"; and Melissa Lane, "Thoreau and Rousseau: Nature as Utopia," in *A Political Companion to Thoreau*, pp. 178–204; 68–98; 341–71.

⁵⁵George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 33.

⁵⁶Turner, "Performing Conscience"; Brian Walker, "Thoreau on Democratic Cultivation," *Political Theory* 29 (2001): 155–89; Cavell, *Senses of Walden*.

⁵⁷Grodzins, *American Heretic*, pp. 342, 492.

psychology that underwrites the concept of limited government. As historian Daniel Walker Howe explains,

In the moral philosophy Thoreau had learned at Harvard . . . the highest faculty was conscience, or the moral sense; then came prudence, the faculty that calculated one's rational self-interest. Below these were ranged the passions, needing to be kept under rational control.⁵⁸

Howe argues that in demonstrating that "the individual conscience could and must be empowered to act, and not only for the individual himself, but also upon the body politic,"⁵⁹ as was evident in his refusal to pay the poll tax or his speeches on behalf of John Brown, Thoreau made a significant contribution to the American self. David Robinson likewise asserts that Thoreau showed his fellow Americans that "moral dissociation from evil is the first step in recognizing that it is not a necessary evil, that political institutions and policies that have been created in the process of history can also be changed in that same process."⁶⁰

Recent interpretations of Thoreau, most of which are admiring but some of which pronounce his political philosophy a "failure" for its inability to appropriate liberal values,⁶¹ neglect to come to terms with the uniqueness of his approach. Thoreau's letters and journals, in particular, offer insight into the mind of a theorist who transcends the boundaries of political duty as he focuses on cultivating a self; indeed, Thoreau takes his personal freedom (awarded by the state) to its logical conclusion: a life determined by its own horizons, creating and sustaining its own limits. Thoreau, ultimately, is defined not by his conscience but by his yearning for indifference, achieved through a sustained attention to "minding his own business."⁶²

⁵⁸Howe, *Making the American Self*, p. 249.

⁵⁹Howe, *Making the American Self*, p. 250.

⁶⁰David Robinson, *Natural Life: Thoreau's Worldly Transcendentalism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 55.

⁶¹Alfred Tauber, *Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 5.

⁶²Thoreau, *Reform Papers*, p. 159.

Thoreau's political indifference, however, met its limit with American slavery, and his understanding of that constraint is revealed in a poignant journal entry of 16 June 1854, not long before he delivered the speech that would become "Slavery in Massachusetts":

I had never respected this government, but I had foolishly thought that I might manage to live here, attending to my private affairs and forget it. . . . For my part, my old and worthiest pursuits have lost I cannot say how much of their attraction, and I feel that my investment in life here is worth many per cent less since Massachusetts last deliberately and forcibly restored an innocent man, Anthony Burns, to slavery. I dwelt before in the illusion that my life passed somewhere only *between* heaven and hell, but now I cannot persuade myself that I do not dwell wholly within hell.⁶³

After 17 June, though, antislavery gives way to his major pre-occupation that summer: the heat. The heat kept him from his attic study and forced him to congregate with the family downstairs. Craving privacy, he lamented, "Society seems to have invaded and overrun me. . . . I have made myself cheap and vulgar."⁶⁴ Thoreau's political interest may have been drawn to certain *events*, but he never developed that interest into a theoretical framework for effective political participation. Quite simply, he chose not to.

To those who would congratulate Thoreau as a defender of resistance, hear his words on the subject: "The attitude of resistance is one of weakness, inasmuch as it only faces an enemy; it has its back to all that is truly attractive. You shall have your affairs, I will have mine."⁶⁵ And to those who would praise his morality, he replies:

The best thought is not only without somberness, but even without morality. . . . The moral aspect of nature is a jaundice reflected from man. . . . There is no name for this life unless it be the very vitality of *vita*.⁶⁶

⁶³Thoreau, *Journal*, 6:355–56.

⁶⁴Thoreau, *Journal*, 6:436.

⁶⁵Thoreau, *Journal*, 9:36.

⁶⁶Thoreau, *Journal*, 1:265.

Finally, those who see him as a reformer should reread “Resistance to Civil Government,” in which he writes:

It is for no particular item in the tax-bill that I refuse to pay it. I simply wish to refuse allegiance to the State, to withdraw and stand aloof from it effectually. . . . In fact, I quietly declare war with the State, after my fashion, though I will still make what use and get what advantage of her I can, as is usual in such cases.⁶⁷

Thoreau “quietly declare[s] war” after his own fashion, which is to say, he rids himself of concern. He wants to withdraw from the state, to “stand aloof from it,” not to change it through voluntary negation. The most important part of the passage, however, is the last, in which Thoreau unapologetically announces that he will “make what use and get what advantage of [the state] I can, as is usual in such cases.” Although abstaining from participation, he insists on his right to the benefits of a democratic society. This underrated Thoreauvian construct, which demolishes the concept of a social contract, propounds the radical notion that the state exists for the individual, not vice versa. In this sense, Thoreau weathers the political storms of the early and mid-nineteenth century differently from many of his colleagues and fellow travelers, for whom social and economic forces figure decidedly in their moral and political theories. For his part, for better or worse, Thoreau simply wants to mind his own business.

⁶⁷Thoreau, *Reform Papers*, p. 84.

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