

The Conscientious Man

“The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right.”
Henry David Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*

Thoreau thinks of the individual in peculiarly modern ways. He declares the primacy of individual rights and argues that the State derives its powers from the individuals. Also, an individual has the right and obligation to do what *he* believes is right and to use his own conscience to oppose or disobey the government and the majority’s unjust policies. Through the course of this paper I intend to examine as to how Thoreau recognizes what is right or wrong? Wherefrom does his conscience arise? How well does his theory bear when we apply it to recent political phenomena?

To be a moral person is to back one’s principles with actions, follow one’s conscience and be willing to sacrifice personal well-being for his ideals. Thoreau’s conscience is the seat of his moral judgment, which has been endowed upon all humans, but is seldom used by the masses. He sees “little virtue in the action of masses” and envisions civil disobedience or non-compliance as a requisite for expressing individual conscience and morality. Majority opinion is an exercise of power and not necessarily just. Thus, issues of moral importance cannot simply be left for the majority to decide.

There are some injustices that must be opposed “cost what it may”. This enables Thoreau to come to the right moral conclusion about the greatest evil of his time – slavery. But there is no way to identify such great injustices without the aid of our conscience; which leads us to find that Thoreau’s morally grounded individual is

unaccountable. There is no particular source, apart from the desire to do justice and not aid injustice, from which he derives his moral fiber. This is a rather perplexing area, for there is no set criteria to rightly judge, universally, as to which laws are just and which are not. For each person's conscience might have a different calling. And also if everyone in the society was to follow only his conscience and disregard laws, society as we know it today, would fall apart. Thoreau certainly doesn't claim that all individuals disobey the laws, but he asserts that unjust laws ought to be disobeyed.

This leads us to problems that we have witnessed in the past and see in our world today. David Koresh believed in the justness of his cause and died exercising his conscience. In the current fight with al-Q'aeda, both the US and al-Q'aeda see themselves as being righteous and doing what is just and required. Again, we find that the circular logic between conscience and justice elicits problems. Though Thoreau successfully countered the problems of his time, his conscientious approach seems to work only as long as the moral character of the individual is good. When we come across fanatical believers, who espouse their supposed conscience driven views as just, Thoreau's conscience based approach becomes quite misleading. And who is to judge moral from immoral and '*unmoral*'?