

On the Duty of Civil Disobedience

by

Henry David Thoreau (1849)

Summarized by

Cleangov

Summary of Whole Book:

The individual does not have an obligation to obey the State unless the individual has consented to grant that power to the State. The individual especially should not obey the State if the person feels the state is in the wrong and the individual feels morally obligated to do the right thing.

The individual should be willing to be imprisoned or even killed if that is the consequence of standing up for what is right, and refusing to support a government that is wrong.

He especially feels it is wrong to pay taxes to a government that is doing wrong, in his case supporting the enslavement of Blacks and invading and conquering Mexico, that such payments give tacit approval to a government doing wrong.

He doesn't feel any obligation to do the work necessary to amend laws or change the character of government more to his liking, other than writing this book and refusing to pay a poll tax for six years and spending a night in the local jail. (Someone else paid his tax and he was then let go.) He didn't feel any obligation to spend a lot more time in jail, to set an example for his fellow citizens.

All in all, a terrific, short (43 pages or so) book. Highly recommended. Lots of ideas worth thinking about and discussing with friends. See below for more of these ideas.

Start of Summary:

The best government is one which governs the least, actually one which doesn't govern at all. It may take some time for the general population to be ready for that second option, but when they are ready, that's the kind of government we'll have.

He speaks of the then-current Mexican war as being something engineered by a few men, and which has the whole force of government behind it, acting as a tool of a very few living people.

Government itself doesn't DO anything productive or creative. It does not open up new lands or keep the country free or educate people. Those kinds of things have been done, and can only be done, by individual human beings with "character" and, indeed, individuals could have accomplished much more without the interference of government.

He doesn't immediately demand his ideal of "no government," but instead says that every person should immediately make known to government what kind of government each person wants.

He laments the current state of affairs whereby the majority decides what is to be done, which is based ultimately on force, and wishes there were some way for what is the right thing to do being the determining factor, regardless of whether that was the majority opinion or not.

He does not feel any obligation to follow the dictates of government, where those dictates are counter to his own conscience, his own sense of what is right. He feels his only obligation is to do what he thinks is right.

He makes the observation that truly a corporation has no conscience, but a corporation made up of conscientious men would actually have a conscience.

One consequence of people's desire to respect the law is that millions of soldiers go off to fight a war which very few of them feel should be fought. (Probably talking of the Mexican war, although he didn't say, "millions.") Are such soldiers men, or are they mere tools of war, at the service of some man in power? The large majority of men who serve the state, whether as soldiers or bureaucrats, do not serve with any sense of judgement or morals but are similar to rocks and pieces of wood, that is, mere things, not people possessed of reason and free will.

Those few heroes and reformers and martyrs who also serve the state with a sense of moral rightness are very few and usually end up being attacked and prosecuted by the state.

He points out that in this country supposedly standing for liberty, one sixth of the population are slaves. He points out that the country has invaded and conquered another land, (Mexico) and subjected it to military law, again something not quite in keeping with the ideals upon which the country was founded.

He says we must free the slaves and should cease our war with Mexico, even if it were to cost us our individual lives, and the life of the country, because it's the right thing to do. He says the real opponent in doing that is not the people in the southern states, but the farmers and merchants right there in Massachusetts who are more interested in the status quo of business as usual, than they are for justice for the blacks and for Mexico, regardless of the cost to do the right thing.

Thousands say they are opposed to slavery and to the war with Mexico, and who do nothing about it, but carry on with their everyday affairs as if everything is all right.

Voting for what one feels is right is *doing nothing* for it, but is only a "feeble" expression to one's fellows of what you think. If one leaves it to the majority to vote for the abolition of slavery it will only come when there is very little slavery left to be abolished, or when it doesn't matter much any more. And by that time, the people voting will be the only actual slaves. (of the State)

How many real men are there in a thousand square miles of America? Hardly one. What has happened to the American? He has become a person of little intellect, but a great party-goer who is mainly interested in seeing to it that the poorhouses are well funded and that social welfare is in place to take care of him and see that he gets a decent burial. (I took some liberties with the phrasing there.)

A man is under no obligation to right even the biggest wrong, because he may have other matters to attend to, but he can at least not participate in the wrong and can withdraw his support of the wrong. Meaning, if one still pays taxes to the government which is engaged in wrong actions, then that man is indirectly supporting those wrong actions.

If one acts out of principle, one's concept of what is right, that is essentially revolutionary and separates one from that inside one's self which is diabolical towards that which is divine.

If the law requires you to be an agent of injustice, then one should break the law.

He is not willing to actually do the remedies provided by the State for fixing the evils present in law or government. They take too much time. He did not come into this world mainly to make it a good place to live in, but only to live in it, regardless of its rightness or wrongness.

If only one man in Massachusetts stopped holding slaves and withheld tax money from the State, and were locked up in prison, it would mean the abolition of slavery in America, because that would be the beginning of many men making the same decision.

If a government imprisons any people unjustly, the only true place for a just man is also in prison. And people need not fear that they would no longer be heard, if they were in prison, because truth is stronger than lies. A minority which goes along with the majority is powerless, but is irresistible when it uses its whole power to obstruct the wrong action taken by the majority.

One can say to public servants who realize they are doing wrong, but say they can't do anything about it, "You can resign your office." If the person does resign, that is a sort of revolution all by itself, and may lead to others following his example.

Those who assert the purest Right usually are not the sort who have amassed much wealth. These are the people who are most dangerous to a corrupt State.

The best thing a man can do when he does attain wealth is to pursue those dreams he had when he was poor.

If one doesn't pay taxes one will soon have one's property taken and wasted by the state, and one's family will be harassed endlessly. This is very difficult. This makes it impossible to live honestly and at the same time have a comfortable life, in the material sense. To be in the "right," one must refuse to earn money and would have to live on the streets, and no longer be a target of the tax man. Thoreau says that until he needs the protection of the State in some southern port or until such time as he endeavors to build up a sizable estate by commerce, he can afford to refuse to swear allegiance to Massachusetts and refuse to give Massachusetts any of his property (taxes). It is less expensive to him to pay the penalties than it is for him to obey the dictates of the State.

He was put in jail for one night for not paying a poll tax. He felt the State thought it was punishing him, but it was only affecting his body. The State could not affect *him*. His thoughts and ideas were unaffected, which were the things which were really dangerous to the State. The State is not armed with superior wit or honesty, but only with superior force.

When he came out of jail (after someone else paid the tax) he looked at his fellow townsmen differently and saw them as fair weather friends only, people who were not prepared to do what was right. They were prepared to take no risks, not even risks to their property, let alone risks to their safety or their lives.

The authority of government, even such a government as I am willing to submit to, is still very imperfect. "To be strictly just it must have the sanction and consent of the governed. It can have no pure right over my person and property but what I concede to it. 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."

"There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly. I please myself with imagining a State at least which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor; which even would not think it inconsistent with its own repose if a few were to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, nor embraced by it, who fulfilled all the duties of neighbors and fellow-men. A State which bore this kind of fruit, and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which also I have imagined, but not yet anywhere seen."

End of Summary

Start of Summarizer's comments and opinions:

Whew! I can see why this book never really makes it to the top of high school or college reading lists.

This is a very dangerous book and really puts out there an extreme viewpoint (I would say most people would look at it that way.) regarding the relationship of the individual to the State. He says a lot in a very few words.

The whole book is pretty short, 43 pages in the version summarized here, and there are some very deep thoughts to ponder and chew on.

I paraphrased and included a few quotes from the book (see above), which I ordinarily wouldn't do, but since this book is long out of copyright, it doesn't matter.

I found I had to look up several words in the dictionary and I found many of his sentences very long and it took me awhile to wrap my wits around some of them. It's not poetry, but like some poems he manages to cram an awful lot of unique ideas onto a single page.

I personally don't think one can take things to the extreme he espouses. I think one has to work within the current culture and that includes the current government. He says it is not his job to put things right with the government and it would take too much time.

He doesn't say whose job it is.

I think the government is influenced greatly by people who have the time and energy and inclination to bend the government closer to their wishes. Hence income tax, deficit spending, war after war, you can add your own items to the list.

I feel it is incumbent upon us to devise ways for us to exert an influence on the government that is AT LEAST as effective as what is achieved by various special interest groups. That is, we need to create an organized special interest group that has the interests of all the people at heart. For lack of a better phrase, I am calling it "The Responsible Freedom Party." This political party is unique in that it welcomes members of other parties with open arms. They can remain members of their favorite party while also being a member of The Responsible Freedom Party. Kind of like dual citizenship. This new party is for anyone who produces, (or used to produce, before retiring) things of value that other people are willing to pay for. (legally, of course. Drug dealers and others of that ilk need not apply.)

More on that elsewhere.

Also, I feel there needs to be a reform of the laws that govern how juries may operate. I feel a jury of one's peers is the last line of defense the individual has against a huge and wealthy (with our money) and powerful State. I feel they should be given much more authority and power to

act and decide things regarding the one case before them, even to the point of declaring a law to be unconstitutional. I think they deserve that power at least as much, maybe more so, than the 9 justices who sit on the Supreme Court. More on that idea elsewhere, also.

I notice his two largest examples of the State being in the wrong are the enslavement of Blacks and the US invading and conquering Mexico. He doesn't mention anything about women not being able to vote, so this may not have seemed to him to be much of a problem, at least not at the time he was writing, 1849.

In the meantime, I highly recommend buying this book. It is a terrific book, one that deserves a wider audience and a wide discussion of the ideas presented therein.

Sincerely,

Cleangov

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