

Freedom through Critique: Thoreau's Service to Others

Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations.

—Thoreau, *Walden*

[M]ake them hunters ... mighty hunters at last ... hunters as well as fishers of men.

—Thoreau, *Walden*

It is no wonder that Thoreau's detractors often see him as antisocial and nearly misanthropic. Throughout *Walden*, for example, he moves back and forth between recounting his solitary experiments in the woods and sharply critiquing the lives his contemporaries lead. Of course, delight and optimism shine through his descriptions of building a house, taking walks, and bathing in the pond, but his critiques are pointed enough that two intellectual historians call *Walden* "a diatribe against the life of the village and the farm."¹ Thoreau's readers can justifiably ask why he returns so often to writing about the meagerness of other people's lives. Why, say, in *Walden* does he repeatedly interrupt his account of hoeing beans to indict everyone else? If his society corrupts its members and nature is restorative, why not leave the society behind and concentrate just on communing with nature?² An obvious conclusion to draw is that Thoreau is crankily focused as much on getting free *from* human culture as he is on getting free *for* a better way of living.

It is possible, though, to take a more charitable view of his critiques of contemporary life. I want to suggest in this paper that they generally reflect an appropriate and carefully designed approach to guiding his readers toward a way of life which he deems ideal.³ His approach is appropriate given what that way of life is. To guide his readers properly by his standards, Thoreau has to emphasize negative freedom at least as much as positive freedom. Concentrating on negative freedom, as it is typically understood, we look backward at hindrances to get away *from*; when attending to positive freedom, we gaze forward toward the better lives that liberation should afford. Ultimately, though, Thoreau levels his critiques in the interest of getting us free *for* what he considers ideal. First and foremost, his critiques represent an attempt to perform a service to other people.

Like certain recent commentators,⁴ I read his writings here as a revival of the traditions of “spiritual guidance” in ancient philosophy, traditions he quite likely was familiar with in being heavily conversant with ancient thought.⁵ Guidance in those traditions was spiritual not in a religious sense, but insofar as it was aimed at the transformation of the whole self. The goal of self-transformation was central to ancient philosophy. In fact, “Ancient philosophy was, above all, help with life’s problems and spiritual guidance, and the ancient philosopher was, above all, a spiritual guide [*kathégemôn*]. Only secondarily — namely, insofar as this was considered essential to spiritual guidance — was ancient philosophy a theoretical explanation of the world.”⁶ Cicero, for example — whose writings Thoreau was well acquainted with — offers guidance in part by setting himself up as an exemplar to be imitated (for example, in *De officiis*, I.22.77). His choice to do so fits with the ancient view that studying how certain exemplars acted virtuously in particular circumstances can over time help cultivate in us a capacity to tell which actions are best in a given situation. As Cicero sometimes does, Lucretius often aims to have therapeutic effects on his readers. For example, in *De rerum natura* — which Thoreau also read — Lucretius makes his descriptions of war horrifyingly violent in ways that should jolt us into recognizing our own tendencies toward aggression and into reining them in. Ideally, as a result our everyday lives will change: taking up philosophy, we will spend each day trying “to build affectionate relationships” with family, friends, and society, working “to limit and manage [our] own desires,” and avoiding the harm that others might inflict on us.⁷

The paradigmatic ancient spiritual guide probably is the figure of Socrates who appears in Plato’s dialogues.⁸ To get a sense of some often overlooked aspects of his *psychagogia* (“soul-leading”), consider a move he makes in the *Euthyphro*. Upon asking Euthyphro whether piety is what it is because the gods love it or the gods love it because it is pious, he offers a series of analogies (10a-c), raising the question, for example, of whether a seen thing is seen because someone sees it or someone sees it because it is seen. He does so simply to try to confuse Euthyphro and thereby render him more compliant.

The analogies have the logical force of a cloud of dust in the face. ... It is consistent to claim that a seen thing is seen because someone sees it, a beloved thing is beloved because someone loves it, and piety is pious because the gods love it. The multiplicity of analogies Socrates throws at Euthyphro, as well as their lack of logical and persuasive force, suggest that Socrates does not intend a straightforward refutation of Euthyphro.⁹

Rather than aiming at refutation, Socrates employs rhetoric since it stands to

be a more effective means of ultimately leading Euthyphro toward a life of examination.

As especially the examples of Lucretius and Socrates should make clear, philosophers in antiquity often used finely honed rhetorical devices to guide other people to self-transformation and, in turn, certain ways of life. In this paper, I focus on the extent to which Thoreau in related ways carries out "an *act of communication*."¹⁰ My main contribution is to point to the importance of critique in his approach,¹¹ using the concern about his solitariness as an occasion for exploring his mode of communication. Responding below to the concern, I first piece together his account of how one can genuinely benefit other people, and I then point to his attempts to help others in a way that coheres with that account. The discussion leads into an explanation of why his critiques are appropriate.

I. What People Need Most

It takes only a short search in Thoreau's writings to find rather biting comments about the culture that surrounds him. Some of them are well-known, such as his remark that "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."¹² Though that line may reflect concern for other people, he can seem mainly antipathetic toward them when, for example, he writes, denouncing conformity, that "The greater number of men are merely corporals,"¹³ when he frets that "[W]herever a man goes, men will pursue and paw him with their dirty institutions, and, if they can, constrain him to belong to their desperate odd-fellow society,"¹⁴ and when he cries: "Give me a wildness whose glance no civilization can endure. ..." ¹⁵ Seclusion may appear to be what he wants the most.

In line with what we might thus expect, one of Thoreau's contemporaries who knew him personally deemed him a "consecrated crank."¹⁶ Even Emerson regretted the extent of Thoreau's solitariness. Early critic James Russell Lowell writes that Thoreau "finds none of the activities which attract or employ the rest of mankind worthy of him," and Robert Louis Stevenson charges that Thoreau's "ruling passion was to keep himself unspotted from the world."¹⁷ A more recent critic writes in a similar vein:

Thoreau countered his alienation by cultivating what [Erik] Erikson calls a "negative identity," in which a tenuous sense of self is "expressed in a scornful and snobbish hostility toward the roles offered as proper and desirable in one's family or immediate community." Acutely sensitive to Concord's judgment of him, Thoreau responded by disparaging his townsmen en masse and defining himself by what he was not. ... Thoreau never *felt* himself — never

brushed up against the distinguishing contours of his being — unless he had a negative reference point for self-affirmation.¹⁸

Perhaps most strikingly, in a recent book on Thoreau, an *advocate* of his thought deems him

sadly removed from the social world of other human beings. In short, Thoreau's vision ... remained communally myopic and thereby restricted to a world of his own making. Others were simply not particularly germane for him. ... Thoreau cut a sorry figure. ... [Emerson's unflattering appraisal of him after the two had parted ways] was not solely the assessment of an antagonist but seems to have been a general opinion, one Thoreau himself recognized as widely held. ... Thoreau reciprocated the quiet hostility of his neighbors. ... [He had] self-centered, asocial inclinations. ...¹⁹

Why does it make sense to think, in spite of these common impressions, that Thoreau tries to perform a service to other people?²⁰

First, he suggests that he has a strong sense of responsibility to them, and there is reason to believe him. Readers are often prone to think he is preoccupied with himself, since he can seem to be heavily concerned with refashioning himself just for the sake of his own fulfillment. Thoreau does work intensely at remaking himself in order to improve his life. He also seems far from immune to the fear that he is too self-involved and neglects other people. In one entry in his journal, he writes: "I must confess I have felt mean enough when asked how I was to act on society — what errand I had to mankind. Undoubtedly I did not feel mean without a reason. ..." Nevertheless, he immediately adds that "[M]y loitering is not without defence."²¹ In explaining why in the rest of the journal entry, he hardly denies having social responsibilities; in fact, he suggests he is deeply committed to helping others: "I know no riches I would keep back. I have no private good — unless it be my peculiar ability to serve the public. This is the only individual property."²² In another work, he extends this invitation: "Use me, then, for I am useful in my way, and stand as one of many petitioners ... supplicating to be put to my use, if by any means ye may find me serviceable. ..." ²³ Thoreau even goes so far as to declare later in his journal: "I am not above being used, aye abused, sometimes."²⁴ In the earlier journal entry, for example, he simply maintains that his "loitering" can best prepare him for the task of serving others — that he can do the most good for them only by first enriching himself.²⁵

That sort of claim surfaces frequently in his writings. For example, in a book review published in the year after he wrote the earlier journal entry, he contends that one must reform oneself in order to reform society.²⁶ Elsewhere he insists that the best contribution a citizen can make to a community is not a prudent vote at the polls or change in governmental policy, but an enhanced self.²⁷ In *Walden*, he says that to live harmoniously with other people “means to get our [own] living together” so that we are not a hindrance to them;²⁸ and he makes the point bolder in another essay, exclaiming that the person worth the most to others is the one “who is minding *his own business*” in the sense not of leaving other people alone, but of responsibly taking care to cultivate personal strengths.²⁹ Thoreau leads us to think that one of his principal aims — even especially in sculpting himself — is to become as useful as he can be to others.

Granted, there are passages in his works that can seem to strongly suggest otherwise. At one point, he writes: “I feel that my connection with and obligation to society are still very slight and transient.”³⁰ But such lines simply reflect Thoreau's rejection of conventional moral standards, particularly those according to which an action is charitable. In refusing to follow them, he often speaks in an ironic voice, calling an action “good” when it would meet common expectations and “evil” when it would clash with them, and using terms such as ‘obligation’ and ‘character’ in line with how his society tends to use them. He does so at one point in *Walden*, for example, when he writes: “As for Doing-good, that is one of the professions which are full. ... Probably I should not consciously and deliberately forsake my particular calling to do the good *which society demands of me*. ...”³¹ Why does he say he should not?

Philanthropy, as Thoreau calls it — meaning human actions that are typically *considered* charitable — fails to help other people in the best way possible.³² On the one hand, philanthropists may tend to a person's physical needs, such as hunger or thirst, or try to save the person from physical danger. But Thoreau points out: “I can find you a Newfoundland dog that will do as much.”³³ On the other hand, a philanthropist may try to help the poor feel better about themselves by, say, dressing them in more fashionable clothes and granting them other luxuries prized by people who have more money than they have. That also is beside the point. Often the poor are happy enough without such luxuries,³⁴ and even a poor person who would prefer to have luxuries is better off without them insofar as they tend just to be encumbrances.³⁵

Philanthropists and everyone else who goes about “Doing-good” — that is, who tries to be of service merely by following conventional standards of morality — may on balance harm the needy person.³⁶ For that reason, philanthropy even is irresponsible. In one of his writings, Thoreau speaks to “My most serene and *irresponsible* neighbors,” saying, “let us see that we have the *whole* advantage of each other; we will be useful, at least, if not admirable,

to one another.”³⁷ One can offer other people the whole advantage of oneself not by *doing* good, but by *being* good, as he puts it — in other words, by crafting a rich life and thereby having genuine wealth to offer others.³⁸ In setting aside conventional morality to enrich ourselves as much as we can, we may not gain the admiration of our neighbors, but we can end up with a gift most worth giving them.³⁹

On Thoreau’s account, the reason is that everyone needs most of all to reach a “solid bottom,” as he calls it.⁴⁰ He is not as precise here as we might want him to be, but the solid or “hard” bottom, in any case, is what “we can call *reality*, and say, This is, and no mistake. ...”⁴¹ When we hit bedrock, our sense of being in contact with reality is so keen and unshakable that, for him, it qualifies as knowledge. No doubt, this is not a sort of knowledge that consists of propositions. On one occasion, Thoreau even says it amounts to nothing “more *definite* than a novel and grand surprise on a sudden revelation of the insufficiency of all that we had called Knowledge before. ...”⁴² Nonetheless, contrary to what he implies at an earlier stage in his thinking, it is more than just “a consciousness of [one’s] ignorance”⁴³ — it is also “[a]n indefinite sence [*sic*] of the grandeur and glory of the Universe. It is the lighting up of the mist by the sun,”⁴⁴ illuminating who I am, what the world is, and how I stand in relation to it.

The mist is that which clouds our view of what lies beyond the mundane.⁴⁵ Accordingly, in the dawn, our lives become profoundly meaningful. Thoreau suggests as much also when, for example, he promises almost hauntingly: “If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career. Be it life or death, we crave only reality.”⁴⁶ Our craving reflects a genuine need — in fact, a need which is deepest and most important to fulfill, for not until we have knowledge are we in position to “begin,” as he says.⁴⁷ What we can begin to do is live beautifully and fully.

II. *Helping Others*

If what people need most is the sort of knowledge just described, what, according to Thoreau, does it take to genuinely help them? Consider first what he says gaining knowledge requires. On his account, there is no guarantee that we will gain it, for we cannot bootstrap our way to it, methodically following some clear-cut procedure. If knowledge comes to us at all, it does so only through “lieferings [sudden revelations] from the gods,” he says⁴⁸ — “flashes of light from heaven.”⁴⁹ It takes hold of us more than we take hold of it. Nonetheless, we can be open or closed to knowledge to varying degrees.

In the picture Thoreau presents, we are most open to knowledge when, in a certain respect, we are ignorant.⁵⁰ He does not mean just that we have to lack understanding in order to gain it. Rather, the point is that every person’s

overriding tendency is to slip into mental “ruts” and, in turn, fall into what Thoreau calls sleep, a condition in which we are distracted to the extent of being mindless.⁵¹ The more tightly we grip what we regard as our knowledge, the deeper we sink into habits of unreflective thought;⁵² inevitably, the familiarity of routine numbs us and lulls us into slumber. Of course, what we *regard* as our knowledge is only ersatz knowledge, on Thoreau's terms, and in a strict sense, everyone who lacks knowledge proper is already ignorant. In the sense implied here, though, to be ignorant is to have gotten out of one's mental ruts.⁵³ The term ‘ignorant’ is appropriate insofar as freedom from habit comes with a price: our ersatz knowledge lends us a feeling of security, and when jolted out of our comfortable routines, we are left disoriented. We grow “lost” — we “have lost the world”⁵⁴ — partly inasmuch as we no longer have a handle on it cognitively. The experience is unsettling, yet if the shock of disorientation awakens and sensitizes us enough to ourselves and the universe, we ultimately become susceptible to its “grandeur and glory” (the “lighting up of the mist by the sun”). We are exposed and vulnerable, but freer to gain genuine knowledge.⁵⁵

It is because of what knowledge is that we have to be lost to gain it, as Thoreau indicates: “At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us *because unfathomable*” (emphasis mine). Though it may seem odd for Thoreau to suggest that we can come to the solid bottom only through encountering what is *unfathomable*, his meaning grows clearer when he soon adds: “We need to witness our own limits transgressed. ...”⁵⁶ Recall that when I reach bedrock, I am struck by the grandeur and glory of the universe. To sense its grandeur and glory, I have to be overwhelmed by its vastness and depth — such that I see my *cognitive* limits transgressed. When I do so, I can find the universe great enough to leave my life profoundly meaningful. In that sense, infinitude grounds me. What I fathom is the extent to which the universe escapes my understanding and, in turn, proves to be extraordinary.

By getting and staying sufficiently awake through escaping and avoiding mental ruts, one can render oneself as amenable as possible to the “sudden revelations” through which knowledge comes to us.⁵⁷ The most promising means of keeping out of mental ruts is living “deliberately,” as Thoreau puts it.⁵⁸ To live deliberately is to take possession of one's life by being constantly mindful of what one does and why one does it and by thoughtfully choosing the ends one seeks. Making thoughtful choices requires genuinely considering all options — all directions in which to “walk,” in Thoreau's language.⁵⁹ In such honest reflection, we face what he calls wilderness — foreign, uncharted territory. There we can grow lost enough to gain knowledge.⁶⁰

We resist heading toward the wilderness, even though “a subtle magnetism” — our craving for reality — draws us there.⁶¹ To head in that

direction is to depart from civilization. Although, to repeat, we are predisposed to fixity in general, we are especially inclined to get stuck since we generally “belong to the community,” to use Thoreau’s phrase.⁶² What that means is that by failing to think for ourselves, we tend to be unduly influenced by other people and by what is deemed “common sense.”⁶³

Take, for example, our typical assumption that it is pointless to try to figure out what is best, since answers would always prove too elusive. In programmatic passages in *Walden*, Thoreau compares that assumption to the common belief among people in nearby Concord that Walden Pond is bottomless. That belief itself is groundless: he says about the pond that he “fathomed it easily” and found unmistakably that it has a bottom.⁶⁴ But revealingly, his contemporaries believe the pond is bottomless because “There have been many stories told about the bottom, or rather no bottom, of this pond. ...”⁶⁵ The people who treat those stories as fully reliable do not investigate on their own whether the pond has a bottom. Similarly, to a large degree we presume that serious reflection is pointless because it is rumored to be and we scarcely think for ourselves.

Even if we think there may be some point in seeking answers, we commonly presume that it is not logistically feasible to search in earnest — that, say, one could not earn an adequate living while devoting enough time to reflection. We take that for granted because it seems to us imperative to have enough money to buy what is widely valued, as Thoreau laments in *Walden*:

I sometimes try my acquaintances by such tests as this; — who could wear a patch, or two extra seams only, over the knee? Most behave as if they believed that their prospects for life would be ruined if they should do it. It would be easier for them to hobble to town with a broken leg than with a broken pantaloons. Often if an accident happens to a gentleman’s legs, they can be mended; but if a similar accident happens to the legs of his pantaloons, there is no help for it; for he considers, not what is truly respectable, but what is respected.⁶⁶

Often, we even cling to our ersatz knowledge — whether it is “common sense” or scientific expertise — because it affords us a share of our society’s respect.⁶⁷ In fact, our lives overall usually conform to what most people esteem.

It is, of course, well-known that Thoreau decries conformity, but I should emphasize why, on his account, he does so, since his reason points to another key respect in which we must lose the world. Aware that our culture places a premium on stylishness, for example, we favor “unpatched clothes” even over

having "a sound conscience."⁶⁸ In doing so, we become not simply beholden to other people, but enslaved to them. Slavery, Thoreau writes, "is not the peculiar institution of the South. It exists wherever men are bought and sold, wherever a man allows himself to be made a mere thing or a tool, and surrenders his inalienable rights of reason and conscience. Indeed, this slavery is more complete than that which enslaves the body alone."⁶⁹ Much as Emerson calls for self-reliance, declaring, for example, that "[I]mitation is suicide,"⁷⁰ Thoreau urges his reader to be independent: "Every path but your own is the path of fate. Keep on your own track, then."⁷¹ The fate we risk suffering is nothing less than to miss out on living while staying fast asleep.⁷² After all, whenever we have surrendered our faculties of critical discernment and self-government, we are ill-equipped to get out of our mental ruts so as to awaken. In thinking for ourselves, we gain our soul and are in position to lose the world in the sense of growing disoriented. There again is a cost, since we lose the world in an additional respect: we forfeit the comfort and commendation that come with belonging to the community; when we head into the wilderness, we ourselves grow wild to a certain extent.⁷³ Nevertheless, losing the world in this additional respect allows us to ultimately lose it in the former sense of growing disoriented.

Accordingly, Thoreau suggests that to genuinely help other people, one must free them from the community so that they each can follow their own paths. Philanthropy, for example, often does more harm than good because it stems from the view that people are urgently needy when they lack what the community esteems, so philanthropy tends to convey or reinforce the assumption that what the community esteems most highly really is most important. That is why Thoreau says that the "example" that the philanthropist sets for the needy generally "leaves them far behind. ... You boast of spending a tenth part of your income in charity; may be you should spend the nine tenths so, and done with it."⁷⁴ If I gave up my wealth and took up a life of "voluntary poverty,"⁷⁵ I would strike "at the root" of human problems instead of merely "hacking at the branches"⁷⁶ — for my actions would reflect the conviction that luxuries and prestige hardly matter most, and I could serve as an exemplary model of an individual who finds his own way. It is in that regard that I would "*be good*," to use Thoreau's language, instead of just "doing good." As he urges us to do, I would "spend [my]self,"⁷⁷ instead of just my money and time, on helping other people: I would enrich myself insofar as I regained and cultivated my independence, and by doing so, I would help other people far more than by, say, tending to their physical needs or helping them look more fashionable.⁷⁸

III. Thoreau as Exemplar

Given that Thoreau claims all this, we can understandably expect him to try to serve as that sort of exemplar, and the fact that he does so suggests, in

part, that he is, indeed, driven to enrich other people by freeing them from the community. To argue that his actions cohere with his claims about what it takes to genuinely help others, I want to point to two examples of his attempt to unveil an ideal through his own life — an attempt which is somewhat like Cicero's and other ancient philosophers' efforts to model virtue. Since the examples involve certain essays Thoreau wrote — namely, *Walden* and “Resistance to Civil Government” (or, “Civil Disobedience”) — I should first say a bit about the approach I take here.

After all, in his writings Thoreau clearly enough means to offer more than just a literal record of his choices and experiences. In *Walden*, for example, he himself acknowledges that he puts “the best face on the matter.”⁷⁹ In “Resistance to Civil Government,” he explains in rather grand and dramatic terms that he was arrested and spent a night in jail for refusing to pay certain taxes, and that he refused in part because he believed the government had acted unjustly in imprisoning Native Americans, black fugitive slaves, and prisoners of the current war with Mexico. Yet no doubt, Thoreau's refusal to pay certain taxes in July of 1846 was not as daring or extraordinary as his account in the essay can lead readers to think. About three years earlier, Bronson Alcott and later one of his friends had been arrested when they each had made the same political gesture, and upon their arrests one of Concord's most prominent citizens had paid their taxes for them so that they had soon been released. The constable who arrested Thoreau, Sam Staples, even tried to spare him from jail, offering to pay his taxes for him.

Despite how relatively tame Thoreau's venture into activism was, at some point before Staples tried to release him from his cell in the morning Thoreau apparently had come to hope the incident would end up being an instructive exhibition for other people. When Staples told him he was to be released, Thoreau grew furious: he wanted to be kept in jail longer so that his arrest and confinement would be more striking to observers. Since the reason he was to be released was that someone had paid his taxes for him after his arrest, he insisted that he should have to stay in jail since it was not he who had paid.⁸⁰ So in any case, it is not surprising that in crafting “Resistance to Civil Government,” for example, he used the “facts” of his life “only ... as the frame to my pictures,” to quote from a comment he offers elsewhere about his work in general — that is, he made them “material to the mythology I am writing,” one which was supposed to influence other people.⁸¹ To gauge whether his actions line up with his claims about what it takes to genuinely help others, it makes the most sense to look at what the mythology consists of and, in turn, reveals its specific purpose to be; for constructing such a mythology is just as much an action as, say, engaging in political activism is, and Thoreau, in fact, treated the former sort of action as more important in his case than the latter sort. Granted, there is fairly solid evidence that, for example, he often served as a conductor on the Underground Railroad and went to considerable lengths

to help black fugitive slaves; yet what he mainly devoted his life to is not activism, but writing — even though it was by no means his main source of income. Consider, then, two pictures he paints.

First, especially in *Walden*, he depicts his life as centered on philosophical examination. In explaining early in *Walden* why he went to the woods — what his chief motivation was — he says that he wanted “to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach ... and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it ... or if it were sublime, to know it by experience. ...”⁸² He identifies his endeavor as philosophical in the fullest sense: it entails loving wisdom so much “as to live according to its dictates” and solving “some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically.”⁸³ Thoreau lives by wisdom’s dictates insofar as he does what it takes to be in position to gain knowledge. For example, he tries to make himself more amenable to *lieferings* (sudden revelations) by “simplifying” his life in the sense of clearing away distractions.⁸⁴ It is significant that the title of the first chapter of *Walden* is “Economy” and that he laments in that chapter that “Even the *poor* student is taught only *political* economy, while that economy of living *which is synonymous with philosophy* [emphasis mine] is not even sincerely professed in our colleges.”⁸⁵ He views even his logistical simplification of life as fundamentally and wholly philosophical.⁸⁶ Inasmuch as his project thus embodies the ancient Greek and Roman view that wisdom is an understanding of how to live a life that is good to live, it represents a return to philosophy’s roots.⁸⁷

Thoreau not only claims to center his life on philosophical examination, but also urges other people to take up examined lives. His call for everyone else to privilege examination is especially loud when, for example, he exclaims: “Let us spend our lives in conceiving then.”⁸⁸ For that matter, he can even seem to take on a sharply moralistic tone when in bewailing in another work the coming loss of *wild* apples and warning that domesticated apples are poor substitutes, he invokes condemnatory lines from the Old Testament, such as the following: “Be ye ashamed, O ye husbandmen! howl, O ye vine-dressers! ... the apple-tree, even all the trees of the field, are withered.”⁸⁹ That is relevant here for at least two reasons. For one, he celebrates wildness and suggests that serious reflection is integral to maximizing it.⁹⁰ For another, the wild apples that grow near Concord — like Thoreau — have “strayed into the woods from the cultivated stock,” and yet are “most civilized” in a certain regard.⁹¹

Let me turn now to “Resistance to Civil Government.” Contrary to what we might expect, Thoreau writes in this essay that he does not aim to win the support of a majority of his fellow citizens for the cause of emancipating the Native Americans, black fugitive slaves, and prisoners of the current war with Mexico who reside in American jails. The reason he gives is illuminating: “A wise man,” he says, “will not ... wish to prevail through the power of the

majority,” since “There is but little virtue in the action of masses of men.”⁹² If it mattered most to him to see Native Americans, black fugitive slaves, and Mexicans released, he could work through the judicial system or adopt other “ways that the State has provided for remedying the evil,”⁹³ but in the essay he says he also rejects that option. Here again his reason is telling: “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.”⁹⁴ His main responsibility, to repeat, is not to *do* good, but to be good by living richly. He rebuffs “philanthropy” in the essay, as he does elsewhere, again trumpeting the importance of “giv[ing one]self entirely to [one’s] fellow-men” instead of “giv[ing one]self partially to them.”⁹⁵

There is no question that in his writings, Thoreau acknowledges that he thinks black slaves and Mexican and Native American prisoners should be set free. He even says in *Walden* that he “helped to forward to the northstar” a “real runaway slave.”⁹⁶ But again, his claim is that the sort of slavery in which “a man allows himself to be made a mere thing or a tool, and surrenders his inalienable rights of reason and conscience” is “more complete than that which enslaves the body alone.”⁹⁷ When in *Walden* he reports that he helped to free a runaway slave, apparently meaning someone who was fleeing the Southern institution of black slavery, he does so in a context in which he also writes, for example, that *citizens* “have become the tools of their tools”; that he is inclined to think they “are not so much the keepers of herds as herds are” *their* keepers; that “We do not ride upon the railroad; it rides upon us”; and that “I sometimes wonder that we can be so frivolous, I may almost say, as to attend to the gross but somewhat foreign form of servitude called Negro Slavery, there are so many keen and subtle masters that enslave both north and south. It is hard to have a southern overseer; it is worse to have a northern one; but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself.”⁹⁸ Physical bondage and enslavement are bad, he maintains, but the people who need the most help are those who have surrendered their “reason and conscience” to the community’s dictates which they have internalized.

What he writes in “Resistance to Civil Government” reflects that idea. As he portrays them, taxpayers outside of jail are less free than the Native Americans, black fugitive slaves, and Mexican soldiers in jail are. To pay taxes to a government which behaves unjustly is to be complicit with that government and thus to “resign [one’s] conscience to the legislator.”⁹⁹ It is to be a slave — or, a “subject,” as he puts it here, observing: “The mass of men serve the State thus, not as men mainly, but as machines. ...”¹⁰⁰ For certain reasons, people who are in jail can be much freer than subjects are. For one, in an obvious respect prisoners have often landed in jail to begin with as a result of retaining and exercising their capacities for self-government. Many fugitive slaves, for example, refused to ascribe authority to laws which forbid them to flee.

More important, from jail I can see the world far more clearly, growing more inclined to reclaim my autonomy. In being put in jail, I may directly experience some of the injustice that my government commits; as a result, my consciousness of the need to combat the injustice can be heightened, and my resolve to combat it can be strengthened.¹⁰¹ Further, I am likely to feel distanced from the government which put me in jail and from the culture which is complicit with that government; accordingly, I can view the world afresh. Consider part of Thoreau's description of his time in jail, which here is worth quoting at length:

It was like traveling into a far country, such as I had never expected to behold, to lie there for one night. It seemed to me that I never had heard the town-clock strike before, nor the evening sounds of the village; for we slept with the windows open, which were inside the grating. It was to see my native village in the light of the middle ages, and our Concord was turned into a Rhine stream, and visions of knights and castles passed before me. They were the voices of old burghers that I heard in the streets. I was an involuntary spectator and auditor of whatever was done and said in the kitchen of the adjacent village-inn, — a wholly new and rare experience to me. It was a closer view of my native town. I was fairly inside of it. I never had seen its institutions before.¹⁰² This is one of its peculiar institutions; for it is a shire town. I began to comprehend what its inhabitants were about.¹⁰³

In a critical sense, one can get freer by going to jail. In fact, it is highly significant that in *Walden*, Thoreau rather fondly recounts his time in jail immediately after emphasizing the importance of having “lost the world.”¹⁰⁴

In line with those claims, the chief concern that emerges in “Resistance to Civil Government” is to liberate the mass of taxpayers who mindlessly serve the State and, in turn, sleep through their lives. In the essay, Thoreau presents his opposition to slavery and the current war with Mexico as just occasions for his opposition to the government; for the main question he addresses is this: *given* that he is at odds with the majority of his society, what should he choose to do? His answer, of course, is that he has a genuine obligation to carry out what he thinks is right, and “[A]ny man more right than his neighbors, constitutes a majority of one already.”¹⁰⁵ In other words, he must follow his own path without depending upon others to validate it. That is the core of the reason he gives for refusing to pay certain taxes — and he maintains that it is best for *all* citizens to break ties with an unjust government in the way he

has.¹⁰⁶

In fact, Thoreau also suggests the most pressing need is for *them* to get free, for he pivotally declares that even if *just* “one HONEST man, in this State of Massachusetts, *ceasing to hold slaves*, were actually to withdraw from [his] copartnership [with the government], and be locked up in the county jail therefor, it would be the abolition of slavery in America.”¹⁰⁷ At first, it may seem that the reason it matters most whether citizens resist the government is that they have the most power to reform it. But Thoreau, as he emphasizes, refers here to *just* “one HONEST man,” and his promise in the essay is that the government would have to mend its ways at least somewhat if the number of conscientious citizens who refused to pay taxes grew large enough to burden the government. How could it help, then, for just one person to go to jail for refusing to pay taxes? Thoreau must mean that as a citizen who took a stand against the majority of other citizens, I could escape my own slavery. He indicates as much even more clearly in writing a few pages earlier, for example, that when eventually a majority of citizens abolish slavery with their votes, “*They* will then be the only slaves. Only *his* vote can hasten the abolition of slavery who *asserts his own freedom* [emphasis mine] by his vote.”¹⁰⁸ On Thoreau’s account, taking a stand against the majority would not necessarily *preclude* me from reforming the government, since enough other citizens might join me in my stand, reclaiming their own autonomy. The main point, though, is not to reform the government, but to be free from the most pernicious kind of slavery — that in which one abnegates one’s “reason and conscience.” Thoreau would incite me to withhold tax money and go to jail to get myself freer.

So in the picture he presents in “Resistance to Civil Government,” he refuses to pay certain taxes both to preserve his capacity for self-government and to ultimately provoke his readers to recover their autonomy, acting on the notion that it is the autonomous individual who can be of genuine service to others. In the passage in which he claims that just “one HONEST man” could bring about “the abolition of slavery in America,” he even adds: “For ... what is once well done is done *for ever*.”¹⁰⁹ Quite significantly, that reference to the everlasting ties into an important theme in *Walden*, among other essays he writes. There he says that “In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time ...”, and that “That time which we really improve, or which is improvable, is neither past, present, nor future.”¹¹⁰ What really matters, he suggests in those lines and surrounding passages, is to improve our relation to the eternal — to enhance the extent to which we are free enough to come to stand firmly on the infinitude of the solid bottom which renders one’s life profoundly meaningful. Everything else — what we own, enslavement or imprisonment of the body, the state of the government — matters just insofar as it affects whether we are free in that respect.¹¹¹ Thoreau’s “proper work,” as he calls it,¹¹² thus centers on following

his own path and, in turn, spurring other people to follow theirs. The project of reforming the government and improving other features strictly of our “temporal” existence comes only after the task of enhancing our relation to the eternal.

He acts consistently with that idea in crafting all his writings, even “Slavery in Massachusetts” and other essays that follow “Resistance to Civil Government” and are commonly thought¹¹³ to mark a shift in his focus. In “Slavery in Massachusetts,” for example, penned when fugitive slave Anthony Burns had been returned to Virginia under the 1851 Fugitive Slave Law and antagonism between North and South was steadily growing, Thoreau can sound far angrier about “enslavement of the body,” and he writes such lines as the following:

[M]y 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 ... No prudent man will build a stone house under these circumstances, or engage in any peaceful enterprise which it requires a long time to accomplish. ... life is more interrupted and less available to a man's proper pursuits.¹¹⁴

It might seem as if here he revokes his claim that reaching a solid bottom matters most. But while his attention does shift somewhat in light of recent events, the claim about the paramount importance of knowledge stands securely intact. In fact, Thoreau suggests that what so troubles him about the government's recent misdeeds and the very reason they demand attention is that they impede proper work. “I walk toward one of our ponds,” he grieves, “but what signifies the beauty of nature when men are base? ... The remembrance of my country spoils my walk.”¹¹⁵ The problem with the return of Anthony Burns to enslavement is that “[T]o some extent, the State has fatally interfered with my lawful business. ... it has interrupted me and every man on his onward and upward path. ...”¹¹⁶ Thoreau's lawful business of freely following his own path involves at times helping others escape physical enslavement. So as one critic comments, the “underlying rationale for protest” in the essay “rests on Thoreau's outrage that his own freedom ha[s] been compromised — not that of Burns!”¹¹⁷ The present situation needs to be remedied so that it will be possible again to follow one's path unhindered.

Nonetheless, referring in a closing paragraph to his rightful pursuits that lead him into nature, Thoreau adds that “I shall not so soon despair of the world for” the white water-lily that symbolizes purity,¹¹⁸ and he continues his proper work to some extent, prompting others to reclaim their autonomy as he exercises his. In the essay, he echoes principal themes found in “Resistance to

Civil Government,” stressing that the individual who is right has more authority than the errant majority does; invoking the notion of one’s relation to eternity; calling for “each inhabitant of the State [to] dissolve his union with her, as long as she delays to do her duty”; maintaining that what matters is not which votes are cast, but what the character of each voter is; and insisting that “What should concern Massachusetts is not the Nebraska Bill, nor the Fugitive Slave Bill, but her own slaveholding and servility.”¹¹⁹ Though still somewhat impeded, Thoreau’s proper work carries over even into such later essays as the ones he writes on John Brown. Not only is Brown militant against the evils that hinder Thoreau on his onward and upward path, but also Brown’s heroism, on Thoreau’s terms, lies to a substantial degree in his “arch individualism,” to quote another commentator:

[For Brown] God’s favorite number is the number one: one righteous man. ... [Brown] imagined “one bold and to some extent successful man ... defending his rights in good earnest,” then being put on “trial for life,” finally to be “hanged, if [he] must,” all of which would “arouse ... sympathy throughout the nation,” for “nothing so charms the American people as personal bravery.” ... Brown’s style ... was to work alone and in secret, never showing any interest, for example, in working with others involved in the struggle to make Kansas a Free-Soil state.¹²⁰

So in praising Brown, Thoreau in large part reemphasizes the importance of the autonomous individual.

In short, his actions overall cohere with his claim that the best way to help others is to enrich oneself. First and foremost, he propounds a mythology which is geared to incite his readers to reclaim and preserve their autonomy. In *Walden*, for example, he depicts his life as centered on philosophical examination, calling for others also to take up examination in spite of the “commonsensical” view that it is futile. Similarly, in “Resistance to Civil Government,” he profiles his stand against the majority, recounting his refusal to pay taxes and urging his readers also to break ties with an unjust government. In key part, he performs his service to others by trying to be an exemplary model of an individual who is not a slave or subject, following his own path.

IV. *Dimming the Lodestar*

At this point, a question arises, and it is pivotal since it leads toward the reasons that Thoreau’s critiques are appropriate. In line with the idea that it is vital never to be a slave or subject by abnegating one’s reason or conscience,

he makes such disclaimers as this: "I do not mean to prescribe rules to strong and valiant natures, who will mind their own affairs whether in heaven or hell... ." ¹²¹ But does he not presume to tell us what we should do? As I remark above, he maintains that examination is best for everyone, and he says that all taxpayers ought to dissolve ties with an unjust government. Of course, perhaps he means to prescribe rules only to natures who are *not* "strong and valiant." Yet he is eager to stress: "I would not have any one adopt *my* mode of living on any account. I would have each [person] 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." ¹²² How are we to account for this apparent inconsistency?

Consider first the importance of exaggeration or extravagance in Thoreau. I have already noted that he writes mythologies, instead of just literal records of his choices and experiences, but there is more to add. In a long passage near the end of *Walden*, he salutes "*Extra vagance!*", confessing: "I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be *extra- vagant* enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced. ... I am convinced that I cannot exaggerate enough even to lay the foundation of a true expression." ¹²³ That sentiment is not isolated in his writings. For example, near the beginning of "Walking," he writes: "I wish to make an extreme statement. ..." ¹²⁴ Relatedly, observing in an essay published earlier that author Thomas Carlyle gives exaggerated accounts of figures in history, Thoreau makes a revealing pronouncement:

Exaggeration! was ever any virtue attributed to a man without exaggeration? was ever any vice, without infinite exaggeration? Do we not exaggerate ourselves to ourselves, or do we recognize ourselves for the actual men we are? Are we not all great men? Yet what are we actually to speak of? We live by exaggeration, what else is it to anticipate more than we enjoy? The lightning is an exaggeration of the light. Exaggerated history is poetry, and truth referred to a new standard. To a small man every greater is an exaggeration. *He who cannot exaggerate is not qualified to utter truth.* No truth we think was ever expressed but with this sort of emphasis, so that for the time there seemed to be no other. ¹²⁵

By the "new standard" of truth which Thoreau mentions here, "It takes two to speak the truth," as he claims elsewhere, " — one to speak, and another to hear." ¹²⁶ The reason is that the account I offer you is true only insofar as it conduces to your improvement. In that respect, to utter truth is to "speak a

good word,” in Thoreau’s language.¹²⁷ It is to draw other people toward better lives.¹²⁸

Why, according to Thoreau, does one have to exaggerate or be extravagant in order to meet the new standard? On the one hand, true accounts are extravagant *relative to* the norms of the community to which those people typically belong.¹²⁹ According to those norms, statements must be determinate.¹³⁰ But knowledge, as Thoreau portrays it, cannot be signified in definite terms. (Hence, he asks in the passage quoted above from the essay on Thomas Carlyle: “Yet what are we actually to speak of?”) The most meaningful experience is private enough that it may be even wholly incommunicable.¹³¹ We can witness to the sense with which it leaves us, but our ability to evoke the same sense in other persons is profoundly limited. Anyone who is awake enough to sense the “glory and grandeur of the Universe” will appreciate the extent to which determinate expressions are inadequate to represent it.¹³² To everyone else who listens, though, statements which are true and thus, by necessity, indefinite are extravagant.¹³³

On the other hand, most sleepers scarcely hear what one says. Only “shouting” can get the message across to them.¹³⁴ While drowsiness still clouds their vision and they see nothing beyond their trivial concerns, someone else must prompt them to set their sights higher if they are to have much hope of waking up. To point their vision high enough, one has to exaggerate.¹³⁵ Thomas Carlyle, for example, “creates you an ideal hero” only by giving an exaggerated account of a historical figure’s merits.¹³⁶ Nonetheless, his account is true inasmuch as it can help improve other people by presenting an ideal worth aspiring to.

Thoreau thus claims that one must be able to exaggerate in order to be qualified to utter truth. His claim may seem straightforward enough. But notice a crucial implication of it. Since it comes from him, it makes sense for us to suspect that he himself exaggerates. As if to heighten our suspicion, he chooses strong wording in, for example, a passage quoted above from the essay on Thomas Carlyle: “was *ever* any virtue attributed to a man without exaggeration? was *ever* any vice, without *infinite* exaggeration? ... Are we not *all great* men?” (emphasis mine). Moreover, in “Walking” and *Walden*, he explicitly *says* that he aims to make extreme and extravagant claims, and elsewhere, mentioning “exaggerations,” he exclaims: “I have no respect for facts even except when I would use them, and for the most part I am independent of those which I hear, and can afford to be inaccurate, or, in other words, to substitute more present and pressing facts in their place.”¹³⁷ If people warn us that they are likely to exaggerate, we have good reason to put much less stock in *whatever* they say, or at least to take whatever they say far more cautiously. We, of course, have good reason to take cautiously even their claim that one has to be able to exaggerate in order to be qualified to utter truth. Thoreau seems well aware of that principle and of the effect he can

accordingly have in vowing to exaggerate. Near the end of a 10 April 1853 letter to Harrison Blake in which he makes bold proclamations, he writes: "I trust that you realize what an exaggerator I am, — that I lay myself out to exaggerate *whenever I have an opportunity*, — pile Pelion upon Ossa, to reach heaven so. Expect no trivial truth from me, unless I am on the witness-stand. I will come as near to lying as you can drive a coach-and-four."¹³⁸ Revealingly, in letters to Blake, he insists that one must be foolish not to pursue a life of simplicity and examination.¹³⁹

If Thoreau thus leads us to think that he himself exaggerates, what are we to make of the ideal he erects? Given that he tries to serve as an exemplar, it should be obvious enough that in works such as "Resistance to Civil Government" and *Walden*, he means to create an ideal hero out of himself. In light of what he says it takes to create an ideal hero — in other words, what is required to paint a hero who is admirable enough to be an ideal to which we should aspire — we are left to find it quite possible that he purposefully overstates the extent to which we should imitate him, even when he maintains that we all must examine and refuse to pay taxes. So we can develop substantial doubts about what precisely he encourages us to do.

He sows such doubt because he has¹⁴⁰ to offer us only very vague direction. The ideal hero he creates out of himself is heroic in large part for finding out and pursuing his own way, and it is *by* following his own path that he ends up refusing to pay taxes and engaging in examination. It is not only fine, but best to imitate him in the limited sense of finding out and pursuing one's own way, as he finds out and pursues his; but to imitate him in any fuller sense would be to fail to imitate him well enough in the limited sense — and thus to have set one's sights too low. My own path may not lead to the same places that Thoreau's have led to; and imitation is so numbing that "One cannot safely imitate the actions, as such, even of the wise and good," as he writes in another context.¹⁴¹ In focusing too heavily on what Thoreau does in following his own path, we could get out of old mental ruts only to fall into new ones. The way he guards against that danger is to open for us the possibility that he exaggerates.

It is important to note that in taking measures to keep us from imitating him too much, he hardly implodes the ideal he first sets up, despite the doubt he can generate. As a matter of fact, even alone his considerable efforts to keep us from lapsing into slavery to him are a testament to how resolutely he tries to boost us toward the ideal, since reaching it, to repeat, fundamentally requires finding one's own way. The ideal remains standing also insofar as — given his claim that true accounts are extravagant relative to the norms of the community to which we belong — he can always leave us wondering whether his accounts are not *ultimately* extravagant, but extravagant merely to us; for all we know, it could ultimately be the case that everyone should, indeed, refuse to pay taxes and engage in solitary examination.

However, since Thoreau nonetheless can, and does, present no more than a dim ideal, shedding so little light for us, there is a problem. How are we to find our path or be compelled enough to look for it in the first place? It might seem inevitable that we will stay in the dark hopelessly. After all, we tend to think that navigators are able to head in the best direction only by first figuring out precisely what their destination is and then calculating their way to it.

V. *The Importance of Critique*

Here it can grow plain why Thoreau's critiques are necessary. Notice he says that it is "[i]n our *most trivial* walks [that] we are constantly, though unconsciously, steering like pilots by certain well-known beacons and headlands, and if we go beyond our usual course we still carry in our minds the bearing of some neighboring cape. ..."142 Our walks turn out to be trivial when we set forward having already decided where we should end up, because a route that is too familiar only deepens our slumber before we start to live deliberately, and a course which is too easily plotted threatens to lull us to sleep once we have begun to do so. That is why Thoreau eventually left Walden Pond, as he explains:

I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. ... It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves. I had not lived there a week before my feet wore a path from my door to the pond-side; and though it is five or six years since I trod it, it is still quite distinct. It is true, I fear that others may have fallen into it, and so helped to keep it open. The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men; *and so with the paths which the mind travels.* How worn and dusty, then, must be the highways of the world, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity!¹⁴³

Even after centering our lives on examination, all of us, like Thoreau, stay predisposed to return to old habits or develop new ones. In short, we can find our way only by getting lost. Critique is an indispensable means of helping us get and stay lost.

Thoreau has to critique the community first to provoke us to free ourselves from it while it still enslaves us. As entrenched as we are in our ruts and as hazy as he must keep the ideal he presents, it may not have sufficient power by itself to lure us out of our confinement in the first place. He thus also needs a way to help wrench us free, and by critiquing the culture that holds us captive, he can spur us to walk out of slavery. His critiques are

effective insofar as they open our eyes to the extent to which we are imprisoned. A central function of the essay "Resistance to Civil Government," for example, is to heighten one's sense of being a subject. In reading the essay, I can feel imprisoned especially upon the realization that I will probably have to choose between remaining a subject and being literally sent to jail. Further, it is significant that in *Walden*, Thoreau imagines that Walden Pond may have been "called, originally, *Walled-in* Pond."¹⁴⁴ In works such as *Walden*, as in "Resistance to Civil Government," he highlights our imprisonment in order to divest us of our ties to the culture which enslaves us. As he indicates therein, "our lives must be stripped" of those ties in order to ultimately grow beautiful and full.¹⁴⁵

Once we break free and *take up* the task of finding our own way, Thoreau's critiques, and our own, still are crucial. The ideal he lays out grows no less hazy, and we need just as much as before to be alert to whatever threatens our ability to stay awake, such as returning to enslavement or falling back into mental ruts. Accordingly, we must navigate far less by means of a lodestar than by figuring out which places to leave and what to avoid — and critique makes it possible for us to do so. Thoreau's decision to leave Concord, like his later choice to leave Walden Pond, provides an example of why we may leave a place. Part of his essay "Life Without Principle" points to reasons for which we may avoid certain activities. In it, Thoreau bemoans trivialities and stresses that when we have continually focused on them, we have "desecrated ourselves" and left our minds "profaned." We are shaped to a large extent by what occupies our attention, and when immersed in, say, newspaper stories, gossip, and "conventionalities," one easily becomes habituated and dozy, and it gets more difficult to live deliberately.¹⁴⁶ Thoreau's critique here should attune us to the need to "wash and purify" oneself,¹⁴⁷ and thereby thwart drowsiness, by avoiding trivialities. The importance of avoiding them can help give us direction as we look for our path.

Since we must find our way in general primarily by determining where we had better *not* be and what it is wiser for us *not* to do, instead of settling on a precise destination, it is, indeed, the case that Thoreau emphasizes backward-looking freedom, as opposed to forward-looking freedom. But it should now be obvious that in this Thoreauvian picture, one seeks negative freedom simply for the sake of gaining positive freedom. In other words, when navigating we look backward just because we have to do so to get properly lost: predetermining exactly what our destination is would keep us from reaching it. Our ultimate interest is in how well one can come to live once firmly grounded, and our focus on debasement, helping us to get and stay lost, should only serve as a heuristic aid.

Thoreau vigilantly takes measures to ensure that it becomes nothing more. Given our tendency to fall into mental ruts, we could even get stuck looking backward, forgetting that the purpose of looking backward is to move forward

in the best direction. It is savvy of Thoreau, then, to level this criticism in *Walden's* closing paragraphs: "Some would find fault with the morning-red, if they ever got up early enough."¹⁴⁸ Shortly thereafter, he adds that "The fault-finder will find faults even in paradise."¹⁴⁹ In indicting fault-finders, Thoreau in effect critiques the very enterprise of critiquing, prompting us to break free also from it if it should take us prisoner. Moreover, when his astute readers detect the self-referential incoherence involved in finding fault with all fault-finding — not to mention the irony in *Thoreau's* finding fault with it — they may grow even more suspicious that he writes "extravagantly" and, in turn, be less prone to imitate him too closely. Even in critiquing human culture, Thoreau is careful to see that we find our own way. Further, he not only works to expose our enslavement, but also underscores the potential to escape it. In *Walden*, for example, his critiques are interspersed with accounts of how *he* has found *his* way, and he gives us strong encouragement, writing that near the end of his first year at Walden, he saw the sun light up the mist,¹⁵⁰ and adding, for example: "I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours."¹⁵¹ If we get and stay as free from mental ruts as critique should help us be, he assures us, we can, indeed, reach knowledge.

Despite how lofty Thoreau's rhetoric can be at times, what he calls for is more feasible than it might at first seem. He would simply have us do what it takes to gain what he calls knowledge. On his terms, we are in the best position to gain it when we live deliberately; but our own path would not necessarily lead to an isolated pond or a wholly simplified life, and it might even take us in certain directions Thoreau would avoid. No doubt, fully governing ourselves might also require us to make what look like sacrifices, but they would be worthwhile if he is right that gaining knowledge matters most.

Conclusion

In the end, helping us find our own way is one of Thoreau's principal concerns. Contrary to what is often assumed, he is driven to serve other people. It is in large part to benefit them that he works to cultivate himself, holding that one must enrich oneself in order to be of genuine use to others. That is evident mainly because his actions cohere with his account of what people need the most. On his account, what we most need is to gain knowledge — a sense of reality that renders our lives profoundly meaningful — for once we have knowledge, our lives can start to become beautiful and full. We lack total control over whether we gain it, but when we live deliberately, it is far more likely that knowledge will come to us. The reason is that we can reach knowledge only by losing the world in the sense of growing disoriented, and living deliberately sets us up to lose the world in that respect. Living deliberately requires serious reflection on what is best for oneself, and in

carrying out such reflection, we come face to face with the possibility of living in ways that are foreign to us. Earnestly considering them can mean growing bewildered and unsettled, though it can also wake us up enough to actually live. We resist entertaining foreign possibilities, because we are entrenched in certain habits of thought, many of which are inherited from, and reinforced by, the culture in which we live. We must break free from our community's influence on us, losing the world in an additional respect, in order to get lost in the sense of growing disoriented.

Accordingly, for the most part, Thoreau performs his service to other people by working to get them free from their community's influence. Not wholly unlike Cicero and other figures in antiquity, he presents himself as an exemplar, modeling a life of thinking for and governing oneself free of slavery to others. The ideal, though, is fundamentally to find one's own way, so Thoreau has to keep us from trying to imitate him too extensively. The problem would lie in the strong temptation to unknowingly identify finding our own way with following the particular path that he follows, because his path may not be our own. To guard against the danger, Thoreau leaves us to wonder whether he exaggerates or is extravagant in maintaining, say, that we all must carry out philosophical examination and refuse to pay taxes. Since the ideal he erects thereby grows hazy, it alone may not be powerful enough to draw us out of our habits of thought so that we can awaken and live deliberately. Further, it would not work for us to try to find our way by using the ideal as a lodestar, since our course would be easily plotted, and we have to face mystery to stay adequately awake. Given that that is the case, we need a means of navigating as we try to find our way.

Thoreau's critiques, then, play a vital role in his service to other people, much as other rhetorical devices were integral to ancient spiritual guidance. While, for example, Lucretius' violent descriptions stand to shock his readers into seeing themselves more clearly and Socrates' confusing analogies may leave Euthyphro more compliant, Thoreau's critiques should help us reclaim and preserve our autonomy. On the one hand, they should first spur us to escape the mental habits that our culture reinforces. On the other hand, they should then allow us to stay on our path by reminding us of which places to leave and what to avoid. In looking backward while navigating, we do, indeed, focus on what to get free *from*, but our ultimate interest is in getting free *for* what is best. Thoreau serves as our guide to self-cultivation, prompting us to find our way toward richer and fuller lives.¹⁵²

NOTES

1. Morton White and Lucia White, *The Intellectual Versus the City, from Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright* (Cambridge [MA]: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 30.

2. Of course, despite how few of his writings Thoreau published during his lifetime, we can also ask why he bothers to publish any at all, since in writing to other people, he maintains a connection with them.

3. It makes sense to suppose that even in crafting critiques in his private journal, Thoreau meant to benefit other people. He often wrote in the journal as if he were addressing readers of a published work, which is not surprising, since he included in published writings many segments of text which he had adapted from the journal. It is worth noting also that given what my discussion below points to, Thoreau may level critiques for his own benefit, as well as for ours.

4. See especially Brian Walker, "Thoreau's Alternative Economics: Work, Liberty, and Democratic Cultivation," *American Political Science Review* 92, 4 (1998): 845-56; "Thoreau on Democratic Cultivation," *Political Theory* 29, 2 (2001): 155-89; Pierre Hadot, "Il y a de nos jours des professeurs de philosophie, mais pas de philosophes," in *Exercices Spirituels et Philosophie Antique*, nouvelle éd., revue et augmentée (Paris: A. Michel, 2002): 333-42. Walker writes, for example: "[Ancient p]hilosophers could teach a range of exercises and strategies to help people navigate the everyday temptations and obstacles of political life while preserving their moral integrity and political reputation. *Walden* is a modern revival of this tradition. ... the practices and exercises Thoreau sets out in *Walden* are functionally identical to the techniques found in ancient philosophy." Walker, "Thoreau's Alternative Economics," p. 850. I believe that, unlike Hadot — whose work on ancient philosophy he draws from — Walker vastly underplays the extent to which both Thoreau and ancient philosophers seek not only to improve the logistics of life, but also to see it grow more meaningful in an ultimate sense. (I am deeply grateful to J. Aaron Simmons for translating for me Pierre Hadot's essay on Thoreau.)

5. On Thoreau's strong connections with ancient thought, see Ethel Seybold, *Thoreau: The Quest and the Classics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951); Walker, "Thoreau's Alternative Economics," pp. 849-50, which includes additional relevant bibliographical information. On Thoreau's familiarity, mentioned below, with Cicero and Lucretius, see, for example, Seybold, pp. 16, 23n.1, 24, 24n.9, 75n.6.

6. I. Hadot, "The Spiritual Guide," in A. H. Armstrong (ed.), *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, Roman* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), p. 444. For additional relevant bibliographical information, see Harald Thorsrud, "Is the Examined Life Worth Living? A Pyrrhonian Alternative," *Apeiron* 36,3 (2003): 229-49.

7. Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 262-63, 278; 279.

8. See Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge [MA]: Belknap Press, 2002), p. 213. Even if — as Walker, for example, claims, in "Thoreau's Alternative Economics," pp. 849-50 — Thoreau had less exposure to Plato than, say, to Cicero and the Stoics, Thoreau read Plato (see, for example, Seybold, pp. 25n.9, 39, 41) — enough to have observed Socrates' *psychagogia*.

9. Henry Teloh, *Socratic Education in Plato's Early Dialogues* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), p. 36.
10. Raymond P. Tripp, Jr., *Two Fish on One Hook: A Transformative Reading of Thoreau's Walden* (Hudson [NY]: Lindisfarne Books, 1998), p. 9. As the title of his work suggests, Tripp also emphasizes Thoreau's role as a guide to personal transformation.
11. Richard F. Teichgraeber III, in *Sublime Thoughts/Penny Wisdom: Situating Emerson and Thoreau in the American Market* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), and Sam McGuire Worley, in *Emerson, Thoreau, and the Role of the Cultural Critic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), consider the extent to which Thoreau issues cultural criticism. Whereas Teichgraeber and Worley focus on straightforwardly economic and political implications of Thoreau's critiques, I understand them here as a rhetorical device integral to the spiritual guidance that Thoreau offers individuals.
12. Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden: or, Life in the Woods* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1854), reprinted within *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau*, J. Lyndon Shanley (ed.), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 8.
13. Henry D. Thoreau, *Cape Cod* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1865), reprinted within *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau*, Joseph J. Moldenhauer (ed.), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 203.
14. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 171.
15. Henry D. Thoreau, "Walking," *The Atlantic Monthly* 9, 56 (1862), p. 665.
16. Quoted by the editors in Henry D. Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau: Journal, Vol. 1, 1837-1844*, Elizabeth Witherell, William L. Howarth, Robert Sattelmeyer, and Thomas Blanding (eds.), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 587, and attributed to Isaac Hecker.
17. Quoted in Vicent Buranelli, "The Case Against Thoreau," *Ethics* 67, 4 (1957), p. 257, where Buranelli offers additional related criticism. Ralph L. Ketcham writes "Some Thoughts on Buranelli's Case Against Thoreau," *Ethics* 69, 3 (1959): 206-08, and Buranelli replies in "The Verdict on Thoreau," *Ethics* 70, 1 (1959): 64-65.
18. Robert Milder, "An 'Errand to Mankind': Thoreau's Problem of Vocation," *ESQ* 37, 2/3 (1991), p. 96.
19. Alfred I. Tauber, *Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 222-24.
20. Some of what I relate in the following Milder treats as symptomatic of the "prickly [striving for] self-justification" which he claims "colored all [Thoreau's] relations to the world except his relation to nature" (p. 93). For Milder, Thoreau was intent upon erecting "a bulwark against social and self-accusation" (p. 109). Milder writes that "[I]f the source of Thoreau's wit was aggression and its aim self-apotheosis [as Milder maintains it was], its legitimacy depended on his disguising these purposes and administering the rod for nominally beneficent ends" (p. 123). Milder, though, scarcely offers evidence which directly supports his claim that Thoreau's professed mission to others was a disguised attempt to make himself look better.
21. Thoreau, *Journal 1*, p. 393 (26 March 1842).
22. Thoreau, *Journal 1*, p. 393 (26 March 1842).

23. Henry D. Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1849), reprinted within *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau*, Carl F. Hovde, William L. Howarth, and Elizabeth Hall Witherell (eds.), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 287.
24. Henry D. Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau: Journal, Vol. 3, 1848-1851*, Robert Sattelmeyer, Mark R. Patterson, and William Rossi (eds.), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 287 (6 July 1851).
25. On Thoreau's sense of responsibility to others, consider also, for example, Henry D. Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1864), reprinted within *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau*, Joseph J. Moldenhauer (ed.), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 259.
26. Henry D. Thoreau, "Paradise (To Be) Regained," *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 13, 65 (1843): 451-63, reprinted within *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau: Reform Papers*, Wendell Glick (ed.), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973): 19-47.
27. Henry D. Thoreau, "Slavery in Massachusetts," *The Liberator* 24, 29 (21 July 1854), p. 116, reprinted in *Reform Papers*, pp. 91-109. See especially p. 104.
28. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 72. See pp. 18, 326.
29. Henry D. Thoreau, "Life Without Principle," *The Atlantic Monthly* 12,71 (1863): 484-95, reprinted in *Reform Papers*, p. 159.
30. Thoreau, "Life Without Principle," p. 160.
31. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 73, emphasis mine. See, for example, p. 10; *Journal I*, p. 305 (28 April 1841); *Week on the Concord*, p. 383.
32. On inadequacies of philanthropy, see, for example, Thoreau, "Reform and the Reformers," in *Reform Papers*, p. 187; *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau: Journal, Vol. 4, 1851-1852*, Leonard N. Neufeldt and Nancy Craig Simmons (eds.), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 299 (28 January 1852); "A Plea for Captain John Brown," in *Echoes of Harper's Ferry*, James Redpath (ed.), (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860): 17-42, reprinted in *Reform Papers*, pp. 121, 133.
33. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 74.
34. See, for example, Thoreau, *Week on the Concord*, pp. 266, 267; *Walden*, p. 75.
35. See Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 14, 65-67, 69, 81-82, 328; "Resistance to Civil Government," in *Aesthetic Papers*, Elizabeth Peabody (ed.), (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1849): 189-211, reprinted in *Reform Papers*, p. 77; *Journal 4*, p. 9 (23 August 1851); *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau (Walden Edition): Journal VIII*, Bradford Torrey (ed.), (New York: AMS Press, 1906/1968), p. 120 (20 January 1856), p. 205 (10 March 1856).
36. See Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 75-76.
37. Thoreau, *Week on the Concord*, p. 286, emphasis mine.
38. In regard to the demand to do good, Thoreau says that if he "were to preach at all in this strain, I should say rather, Set about being good." Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 73. But see especially pp. 79, 218; "Reform and the Reformers," p. 191; *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, Walter Harding and Carl Bode (eds.), (New York: New York University Press, 1958), p. 216 (27 March 1848 letter to Harrison Blake).

39. See Thoreau, *Journal 1*, p. 273 (26 February 1841), p. 393 (26 March 1842): "I would fain communicate the wealth of my life to men — would really give them what is most precious in my gift. ... I will sift the sunbeams for the public good."
40. The idea of a hard, solid, or rich bottom or foundation surfaces repeatedly not only in *Walden* (especially on pp. 38, 46, 98, 330), but also elsewhere in Thoreau's writings. See, for example, Thoreau, "Paradise (To Be) Regained," p. 28; *Week on the Concord*, pp. 383, 387.
41. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 98.
42. Thoreau, "Walking," p. 671, emphasis mine. This line is adapted from Thoreau, *Journal 3*, p. 198 (27 February 1851).
43. Thoreau, *Journal 3*, p. 184 (9 February 1851).
44. Thoreau, *Journal 3*, p. 198 (27 February 1851). The latter sentence quoted here appears in Thoreau, "Walking," p. 671.
45. See, for example, Thoreau, *Journal 1*, p. 122 (20 April 1840); *Week on the Concord*, p. 188; *Journal 4*, pp. 17-18 (29 August 1851), p. 231 (31 December 1851), p. 377 (5 March 1852), p. 473 (19 April 1852); *Walden*, pp. 318, 324-25; "Walking," p. 671: "[W]ith respect to knowledge we are all children of the mist"; pp. 672-74. See also Thoreau, *Journal 1*, p. 300 (11 April 1841): "I want a directer relation with the sun."
46. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 98.
47. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 98. See, for example, pp. 12, 23, 38, 45-46, 96, 330; "Life Without Principle," p. 177.
48. Thoreau, *Journal 3*, p. 291 (7 July 1851).
49. Thoreau, "Life Without Principle," p. 173.
50. See Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 6.
51. Thoreau, *Journal 3*, p. 291 (7 July 1851); "Life Without Principle," p. 173. See Thoreau, *Journal 3*, pp. 289-91 (7 July 1851); "Life Without Principle," pp. 169-74.
52. See Thoreau, "Walking," p. 671; *Journal 3*, p. 130 (after 31 October 1850), p. 184 (9 February 1851), p. 198 (27 February 1851); *Journal 4*, p. 345 (13 February 1852).
53. See Thoreau, *Journal 4*, p. 483 (22 April 1852); *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau (Walden Edition): Journal XII*, Bradford Torrey (ed.), (New York: AMS Press, 1906/1968), p. 371 (4 October 1859).
54. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 171. See p. 136.
55. See Thoreau, *Journal 3*, p. 192 (14 February 1851); "Wild Apples," *The Atlantic Monthly* 10, 61 (1862), p. 524: "[Y]ou must lose yourself before you can find the way to ['the Saunterer's Apple']."
56. Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 317-18. See p. 210; "Walking," especially p. 665; *Wild Fruits: Thoreau's Rediscovered Last Manuscript*, Bradley P. Dean (ed.), (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2000), p. 168.
57. See Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 90: "Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep."
58. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 90.
59. Milder, p. 110, is mistaken in claiming that "The 'wildness' Thoreau opposes to civilization is itself opposed by a second, antithetical, but equally valued ideal, contemplation. ..." On Thoreau's account, contemplation is integral to

maximizing wildness. See, for example, Thoreau, "Paradise (To Be) Regained," p. 77; "Walking," p. 659, emphasis mine: "[Y]ou must walk like a camel, which is said to be the only beast which *ruminates* when walking"; p. 673. Paul F. Schmidt, in "Freedom and Wildness in Thoreau's 'Walking,'" *Tulane Studies in Philosophy* 35 (1987), p. 11, aptly remarks that on Thoreau's terms, to achieve wildness we must be "ready to seriously entertain all routes and viewpoints."

60. See especially Rick Van Noy, *Surveying the Interior: Literary Cartography and the Sense of Place* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2003), pp. 38-72.

61. Thoreau, "Walking," p. 662.

62. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 46.

63. See Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau (Walden Edition): Journal XIII*, Bradford Torrey (ed.), (New York: AMS Press, 1906/1968), p. 125 (3 February 1860): "Any fool can make a rule / And every fool will mind it." On "common sense," see especially Thoreau, "Paradise (To Be) Regained," p. 41; *Week on the Concord*, pp. 386, 387; *Walden*, p. 325.

64. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 287.

65. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 285, emphasis mine.

66. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 22.

67. See, for example, Henry D. Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau: Journal, Vol. 5, 1852-1853*, Patrick F. O'Connell (ed.), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 469-70 (5 March 1853); *Walden*, pp. 6, 160; *Journal XII*, p. 371 (4 October 1859). Consider also Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 161: "I was determined to know beans." He makes that remark in the chapter "The Bean-Field" in which he recounts hoeing beans as part of his effort to get closer to receiving *genuine* knowledge, yet in common parlance, 'to know beans' can mean to know nothing of worth or nothing.

68. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 22.

69. Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau (Walden Edition): Journal XIV*, Bradford Torrey (ed.), (New York: AMS Press, 1906/1968), p. 292 (4 December 1860), emphasis mine. See, for example, Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government," p. 77; "Slavery in Massachusetts," pp. 91, 101, 103, 104; "Life Without Principle," p. 174; note (98) below.

70. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," reprinted in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vol. 2: Essays: First Series*, Joseph Slater, Alfred R. Ferguson, and Jean Ferguson Carr (eds.), (Cambridge [MA]: Belknap Press, 1979), p. 27. Importantly, Lawrence Buell, in "Emersonian Anti-Mentoring: From Thoreau to Dickinson and Beyond (In Honor of James McIntosh)," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 41, 3 (2002): 347-60, argues that as Emerson influenced Thoreau, Thoreau also influenced Emerson, and that in considering the relationship between them, we must be on guard against "the habit of imagining intergenerational influence as a unilinear process ... from precursor to successor" (p. 355).

71. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 118. See, for example, pp. 71, 112.

72. See Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 90, where he says that "To be awake is to be alive" and he adds that he did not want to discover "when I came to die ... that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear. ..."

73. See Schmidt, p. 12: "By 'wildness' Thoreau means the 'unbounded, the boundless,' shades of Anaximander, that ancient Presocratic. The unbounded has

no limits; that is, no constraints, no rules, no oughts, no customs, no mores, no laws, no government, no fences, no constitution, no grammar, no human or divine commandments"; Ryan Patrick Hanley, "Thoreau Among His Heroes," *Philosophy and Literature* 25 (2001), especially pp. 60-62. Notice that it is only to a certain extent that we grow wild. See Thoreau, *Journal* 3, p. 174 (7 January 1851); *Walden*, pp. 13, 31, 40, 114-15, 158; "Walking," p. 672; "Wild Apples," p. 525: "I am semi-civilized. ..."

74. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 76.

75. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 14. See, for example, pp. 196, 216, 326, 328; *Journal* 3, p. 122 (31 October 1850).

76. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 75.

77. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 75.

78. On the importance, for Thoreau, of serving as an exemplar, consider also, for example, Thoreau, *Journal* 1, p. 273 (23 February 1841); *Correspondence*, p. 216 (27 March 1848 letter to Harrison Blake); David L. Norton, "The Moral Individualism of Henry David Thoreau," in *American Philosophy* (Supplement to *Philosophy* 1985), Marcus G. Singer (ed.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 239. Thoreau does write regarding philanthropy: "[T]o him who does this work, which I decline, with his whole heart and soul and life, I would say, Persevere. ..." Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 73. But as he makes clear even on the same page, we must engage in philanthropy only if following our own path leads us to do so.

79. See Henry Golemba, *Thoreau's Wild Rhetoric* (New York: New York University Press, 1990), p. 12.

80. Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 199-201, 204-05.

81. Thoreau, *Journal* 4, p. 170 (9 November 1851).

82. Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 90-91. Here it is crucial to keep in mind a point that Martin Bickman makes, in "Thoreau and the Tradition of the Active Mind," his introduction to *Uncommon Learning: Henry David Thoreau on Education*, Martin Bickman (ed.), (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), pp. xxx-xxxi: "[W]hen Thoreau retreats to Walden Pond or takes one of his shorter excursions to wilder places like the Maine woods, it is not to commune mutely with 'nature' ... [For Thoreau] experiences are educative only if [we] actively clarify, internalize, and reflect on them through [our] own language-making." In addition to the passages Bickman cites on p. xxx, see, for example, Thoreau, *Journal* 3, p. 185 (9 February 1851) (line adapted for "Walking," p. 671), where Thoreau apparently understands experiences as mental exercise: "It is remarkable how few events or crises there are in our *minds*' [emphasis mine] histories; how little *exercised* we have been *in our mind* [emphasis mine]; how few *experiences* [emphasis mine] we have had."

83. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 15. In the passage from which I quote here, Thoreau refers explicitly to philosophy. See Henry D. Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau: Journal, Vol. 2, 1842-1848*, Robert Sattelmeyer (ed.), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 240 (after 18 April 1846).

84. In a 27 March 1848 letter to Harrison Blake, Thoreau makes it especially clear that the point of simplifying life is to clear away distractions. Thoreau, *Correspondence*, p. 215.

85. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 52.

86. See, for example, Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 65: "If [other people] cannot understand ['that I can live on board nails'], they cannot understand much that I have

to say." See also Richard Prud'Homme, "Walden's Economy of Living," *Raritan* 20, 3 (2001), p. 108; especially P. Hadot, "Il y a de nos jours des professeurs de philosophie. ..."

87. Of course, the form of philosophical examination which Thoreau himself takes up might rarely be associated, say, with Socrates, who characteristically promotes rigorous argument and counter-argument within a dialogue. (Nonetheless, see, for example, Gary Borjesson, "A Sounding of Walden's Philosophical Depth," *Philosophy and Literature* 18, 2 (1994), p. 289; Tauber, p. 3.) In fact, it is difficult to tell exactly what constitutes Thoreau's form of examination: his references to it — for reasons I indicate below — are often vaguely metaphorical and short on details in contrast to his meticulous accounts of how he spent his money, built a house, and so on.

88. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 97. Granted, Thoreau writes in *Walden*, p. 56, that he is not "certain it is desirable that there should be" a "nation of philosophers," but in the rest of the passage, he goes on to indicate that it is best to be a philosopher. Further, see, for example, Thoreau, *Journal* 2, p. 145 (Fall-Winter 1845-1846), emphasis mine, where he writes that "all men should live" the life of the genuine philosopher; 220 (Winter 1845-1846); *Walden*, pp. 94, 108-09. In conjunction with this line in Thoreau, *Journal* 3, p. 130 (after 31 October 1850): "You might say of a philosopher that he is in this world as a spectator," see also *Walden*, p. 99, emphasis mine: "With a little more deliberation in the choice of their pursuits, all men would perhaps become essentially students and observers. ..." In the rest of the passage there in *Walden*, it is clear — especially given the context of the passage — that Thoreau indicates they *should* do so.

89. Thoreau, "Wild Apples," p. 526.

90. See note (59) above.

91. Thoreau, "Wild Apples," pp. 517, 514.

92. Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government," pp. 69-70.

93. Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government," p. 74.

94. Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government," p. 74.

95. Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government," pp. 66-67. See note (77) above.

96. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 152.

97. See note (69) above.

98. Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 37, 56, 92, 7.

99. Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government," p. 65.

100. Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government," p. 66.

101. See Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government," p. 76.

102. It is worth bearing in mind here that Thoreau heavily distrusts institutions. See, for example, Thoreau, *Week on the Concord*, p. 131; *Journal* 3, p. 376 (19 August 1851); "Life Without Principle," p. 177; note (14) above.

103. Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government," p. 82.

104. See Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 171-72.

105. Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government," pp. 65, 74.

106. See, for example, Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government," pp. 67, 76.

107. Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government," p. 75.

108. Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government," p. 70.

109. Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government," p. 75, emphasis mine.
110. Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 17, 99. See, for example, pp. 8, 98, 99: "[I]n dealing with truth we are immortal ..."; p. 153.
111. Consider also, for example, Thoreau, "Life Without Principle," p. 173: "Read not the Times. Read the Eternities"; p. 174: "What is the value of any political freedom, but as a means to moral freedom?"
112. Thoreau, *Correspondence*, p. 224 (19 May 1848 letter to Horace Greeley).
113. For a recent example, see Lewis Hyde, "Henry Thoreau, John Brown, and the Problem of Prophetic Action," *Raritan* 22, 2 (2002): 125-44.
114. Thoreau, "Slavery in Massachusetts," pp. 106-08.
115. Thoreau, "Slavery in Massachusetts," p. 108.
116. Thoreau, "Slavery in Massachusetts," p. 107.
117. Tauber, p. 191.
118. Thoreau, "Slavery in Massachusetts," p. 108.
119. Thoreau, "Slavery in Massachusetts," pp. 91, 98, 102, 104.
120. Hyde, pp. 137, 135-36. See especially Thoreau, "Plea for Brown," pp. 119, 131-32, 134-35, 136-37; "The Last Days of John Brown," *The Liberator* 30, 30 (27 July 1860), p. 118, reprinted in *Reform Papers*, p. 150; in conjunction with note (110) above, pp. 151 and 153, where Thoreau writes that Brown first of all spoke "the truth" and that he "has earned immortality." Hyde views the connection here between Thoreau and Brown somewhat differently from how I view it, and he apparently sees far less "proper work" than I see in these later essays by Thoreau.
121. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 16.
122. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 71.
123. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 324.
124. Thoreau, "Walking," p. 657.
125. Henry D. Thoreau, "Thomas Carlyle and His Works," *Graham's Magazine*, serialized in two installments: 30 (1847): 145-52, and 30 (1847): 238-45, reprinted in *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau: Early Essays and Miscellanies*, Joseph J. Moldenhauer and Edwin Moser, with Alexander C. Kern (eds.), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 264-65, emphasis mine.
126. Thoreau, *Week on the Concord*, p. 267.
127. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 50, emphasis mine. Thoreau writes here: "I will endeavor to speak a good word for the truth."
128. Consider also, for example, that on Thoreau's account in the passage in *Week on the Concord* from which I just quoted, it is because Friendship genuinely "improve[s] our "character[s]" that it is vital "in the education of men" (emphasis mine). In *speaking the truth*, our Friend "expect[s] nobleness from us" (p. 267), presumably in the spirit in which Thoreau asks in the passage in "Thomas Carlyle" quoted above: "Are we not all great men?" See pp. 281-82; "T. Pomponius Atticus as an Example" (30 June 1837), in *Early Essays*, p. 111; *Journal 1*, p. 107 (11 February 1840); "Thomas Carlyle," 265: "[W]hat is best is truest. ..."
129. See Thoreau, "Thomas Carlyle," p. 265: "To a small man every greater is an exaggeration"; *Walden*, p. 324: "*Extra vagance!* it depends on how you are yarded. The migrating buffalo, which seeks new pastures in another latitude, is not extravagant like the cow which kicks over the pail, leaps the cow-yard fence, and runs after her calf, in milking time."

130. See Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 324: "It is a ridiculous demand which England and America make, that you shall speak so that they can understand you. Neither men nor toad-stools grow so."

131. Thoreau entertains this possibility at times. See, for example, Thoreau, *Journal 1*, p. 273 (26 February 1841), p. 469 (28 September 1843); *Week on the Concord*, p. 365; *Walden*, pp. 141, 216-17. See also William C. Johnson, Jr., *What Thoreau Said: Walden and the Unsayable* (Moscow [ID]: University of Idaho Press, 1991).

132. See Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 324; "Wild Apples," pp. 521-23.

133. Thus, Thoreau writes, for example: "My facts shall all be falsehoods to the common sense." Thoreau, *Journal 4*, pp. 170-71 (9 November 1851).

134. Thoreau, "Thomas Carlyle," p. 265. See Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 141; "Last Days of Brown," p. 148; Tauber, pp. 175-76, where he points to instances in which Thoreau conveys "the inability of others to hear."

135. See Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 27: "In the long run men hit only what they aim at. Therefore, though they should fail immediately, they had better aim at something high."

136. Thoreau, "Thomas Carlyle," p. 264.

137. Thoreau, *Week on the Concord*, p. 363.

138. Thoreau, *Correspondence*, p. 304, emphasis mine.

139. See, for example, Thoreau, *Correspondence*, p. 215 (27 March 1848 letter).

140. See Thoreau, *Journal 1*, p. 393 (26 March 1842); *Correspondence*, p. 216 (27 March 1848 letter to Harrison Blake); *Journal 4*, pp. 170-71 (9 November 1851), p. 273 (21 January 1852), p. 294 (26 January 1852); *Walden*, pp. 16-17: "I will only hint at some of the enterprises which I have cherished. ... [T]here are more secrets in my trade than in most men's, and yet not voluntarily kept, but inseparable from its very nature"; pp. 324-25.

141. Thoreau, "T. Pomponius Atticus as an Example," p. 111.

142. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 170, emphasis mine.

143. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 323, emphasis mine.

144. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 183.

145. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 38.

146. Thoreau, "Life Without Principle," p. 173. See pp. 169-74; *Journal 3*, pp. 290-91 (7 July 1851), and *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau: Journal, Vol. 6, 1853*, William Rossi and Heather Kirk Thomas (ed.), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 65-66 (3 April 1853), much of which he adapted for that portion of "Life Without Principle." Thoreau often advises against reading newspapers. See Thoreau, *Correspondence*, p. 265 (9 August 1850 letter to Harrison Blake); "Slavery in Massachusetts," pp. 100-02; *Walden*, pp. 93-95, 109; "Walking," p. 671. As, for example, Hyde, p. 127, notes, there is evidence that Thoreau read newspapers heavily, "especially during the 1850s."

147. Thoreau, *Journal 3*, p. 291 (7 July 1851).

148. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 325.

149. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 328.

150. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 318. For another instance in which he makes a similar claim, see Thoreau, "Walking," pp. 672-74.

151. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 323.

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