0.1 Chapter 6: curriculum: Political Theory

0.2 Political Theory

1 Henry David Thoreau

Most of the time, successful modern life involves lots of technology, constantly being connected with other people, working very hard for as much money as possible, and doing what we are told. These elements are almost a conventional prescription for success. So it may come as a surprise that some of the best advice about modern life comes from an unemployed writer who lived alone in the woods and refused to pay his taxes. Henry David Thoreau (originally David Thoreau, 1817-1862) reminds us about the importance of simplicity, authenticity, and downright disobedience.

1.0.0.0.1 Thoreau in his 30s

He was born in 1817, in Concord, an unassuming town west of Boston. His father was a pencil-maker and his mother took in boarders. He attended Harvard College in 1833 and graduated in 1837 with good marks. Yet he rejected the ordinary career paths like law, medicine, or the church. He took up teaching for a period, but failed to settle into a job at the local school because he couldnt stand their practice of

corporal punishment. He was, in short, dissatisfied with every obvious trajectory.

Then Thoreau struck up a remarkable friendship with the American philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882). Emerson believed in transcendentalism, an outlook that holds that the world is divided into two realities: material reality and spiritual reality. Transcendentalists emphasise the importance of the spiritual over the material when it comes to leading a fulfilling life.

Emerson and his transcendentalism had a huge influence on Thoreau. Moreover, Emerson inspired Thoreau to work seriously towards becoming a writer. Thoreaus house was busy and noisy, and he found working at the pencil business tiring and uninspiring. But Emerson owned a plot of land in the woods surrounding the nearby Walden Pond, and in 1845 he allowed Thoreau to build a small cabin (3 by 4.5 metres) there. It had three chairs, one bed, a table, a desk, and a lamp.

1.0.0.0.2 The inside of Thoreaus cabin at Walden Pond

Thoreau moved in on the Fourth of July with two aims: to write a book, and to ascertain whether it was possible to work one day a week and devote six to his philosophical work.

In his two years in the cabin, Thoreau penned his most notable work: *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, which was eventually published in 1854. It was a modest commercial and literary success at the time, but it would become an inspirational text about self-discovery. Thoreau argued that his escape to Walden Pond was not simply a relaxing retreat to the forest. He settled there to live deep and suck out the marrow of life, as he put it:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

Thoreau believed that people often miss lifethey remain so stuck in their ways that they fail to see that other approaches to fulfilment exist: it appears as if men had deliberately chosen the common mode of living because they preferred it to any other. Yet they honestly think there is no choice left. After some time in the cabin, Thoreau discovered a different, more conscious lifestyle.

To begin with, Thoreau concluded that we actually need very few things. He suggested that we think about our belongings in terms of how little we can get by with, rather than how much we can get. Money, he believed, is largely superfluous, for it does not help us to develop our soul. Work, in the traditional sense, is also unnecessary: As for work we havent any of any consequence. Thoreau aimed to labour for only one day a week, and found this was entirely possible. He pointed out that walking the distance of a

30-mile train journey took a day, but working to earn the money to pay for the same journey would take more than a day. Best of all, walking allows us to view nature and gives us time for contemplationand that, in Thoreaus view, was what time was for: I found, that by working about six weeks in a year, I could meet all the expenses of living. The whole of my winters, as well as most of my summers, I had free and clear for study.

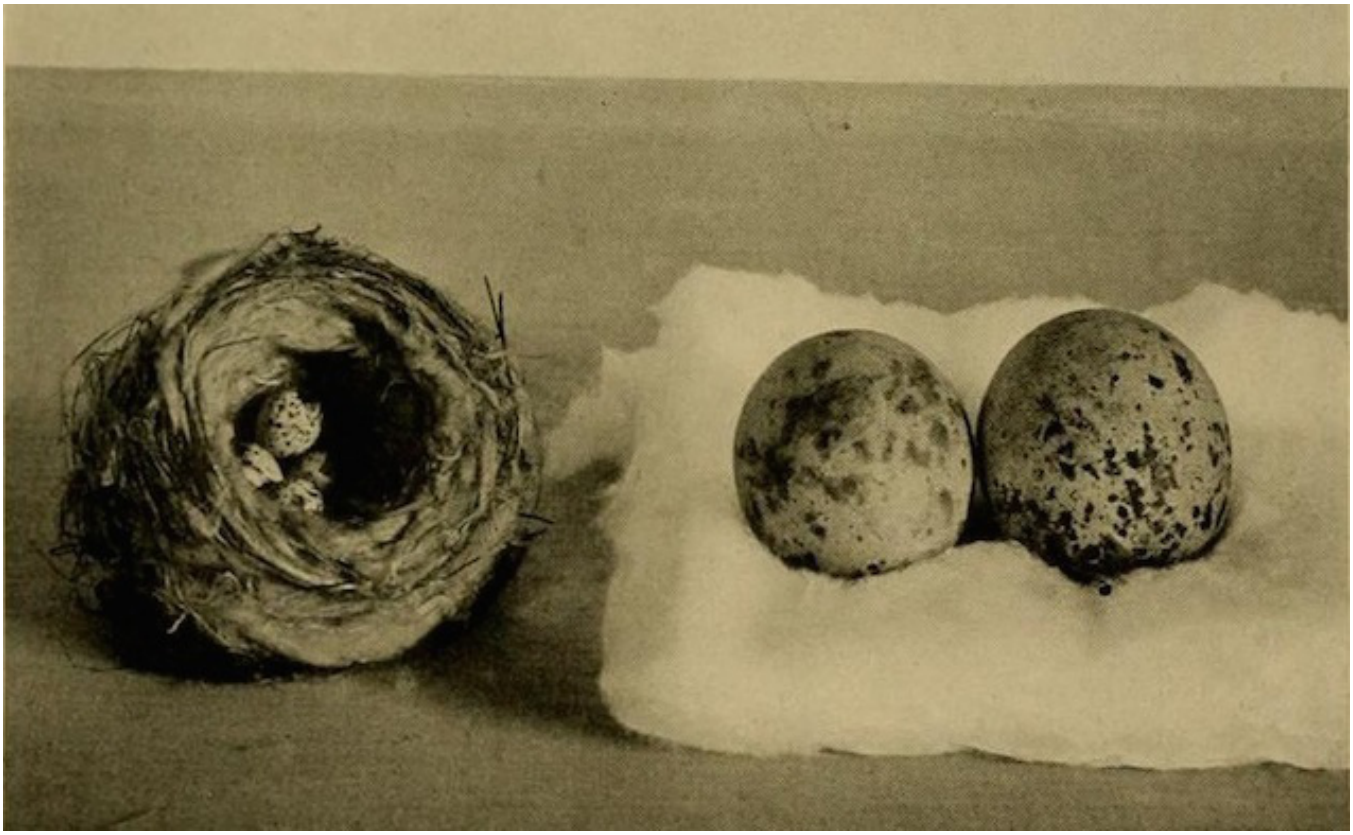
Self-reliance and solitude: Thoreau turned this commercially-made chair into a rocking-chair himself during his time at Walden Pond. I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society, he wrote in his journals.

Like his friend Emerson, Thoreau deeply valued what he called self-reliance. He distrusted society and the progress it seemed to make. The civilised man has built a coach, he said but has lost the use of his feet. He felt that economic independence from other people and from the government was crucial, and

while he understood that we need the company of other people from time to time, he felt that too often we use the company of other people to fill gaps in our inner life that we are afraid to confront ourselves. The task of learning to live alone was, for Thoreau, not so much about carrying out daily chores as it was about becoming a good companion for oneself, relying first and foremost on oneself for companionship and moral guidance: Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole lifes cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another, you have only an extemporaneous, half possession. Most of all, one should change oneself before seeking to change the world.

Thoreau also saw technology as an often unnecessary distraction. He saw the practical benefits of new inventions, but he also warned that these innovations could not address the real challenge of personal happiness: our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. . . We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate. What we need to be happy isnt work or money or technology or even lots of friends, but time.

Thoreau also believed we should look to nature, which is full of deep spiritual significance. He sought to be always on the alert to find God in nature. He thought of animals, forests, and waterfalls as inherently valuable both for their beauty and their role in the ecosystem. He said he would be very happy if all the meadows on the earth were left in a wild state, for we are likely to find that nature is worth more even by our modes of valuation than our improvements are. We can best understand ourselves as a part of nature; we should see ourselves as nature looking into nature, rather than an external force or the master of nature.



1.0.0.0.3 Yellow Warbler and Red-Tailed Hawk eggs that Thoreau found and then gifted to the Boston Society of Natural History

Most of all, nature provides the meaning that money and technology and other peoples opinions cannot, by teaching us to be humble and more aware, by fostering introspection and self-discovery. Thoreau believed that with the right kind of consciousness, human beings could transcend their previous limitations and ideas. This mental stateand not money or technologywould provide real progress. He optimistically declared, only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star. If we clear our lives of distractions and make time for a little contemplation, new discoveries await us.

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Perhaps the best testament of the value of Thoreaus individual contemplation and personal authenticity is that his ideas lead him to powerful political conclusions. He believed that people should behave in a way that would make their governments more moral, prioritising their moral conscience over the dictates of law. In Resistance to Civil Government (1849), Thoreau argued that people are morally obliged to challenge a government that upholds hypocritical or flagrantly unfair laws. The American government of Thoreaus day had, in his view, bullied Mexico into war in 1846 to expand its territory; it also upheld slavery. So Thoreau turned to what he called civil disobediencepeacefully resisting immoral lawsin protest. In July 1846, he withheld payment of his poll tax duty to avoid paying for the Mexican-American war and slavery. He spent a night in prison for his troubles, an adventure that led to the writing of his essay Resistance to Civil Government. There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognise the individual as a higher and independent power, from with all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly, he wrote. I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government.

It was not until it was picked up by subsequent reformers that Civil Disobedienceas it was later calledbecame one of the most influential pieces of American political philosophy in history. Mohandas Gandhi adopted Thoreaus idea of nonviolent disobedience as a model for his fight against British Colonialism, and referred to Thoreau as one of the greatest and most moral men America has produced. In the Second World War, a number of people in Denmark adopted the methods of Civil Disobedience to resist the Nazi movement, and Thoreau became a hero there. Furthermore, Martin Luther King famously used Thoreaus ideas in his fight for equality for African-Americans. Kings first exposure to nonviolent methods of protest came when he read Thoreaus work in 1944; it convinced him that noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good.

1.0.0.0.4 Lunch counter protestors against racial segregation in the American South (here being harassed by racist opposition) are inspired by Thoreaus idea of civil disobedience

Despite his time as a hermit, Thoreau teaches us how to approach our frighteningly vast, highly interconnected and morally-troubling modern society. He challenges us to be authentic not just by avoiding material life and its distractions, but by engaging with the world, and withdrawing our support for the government when we believe it is acting unjustly. This might make us feel uncomfortable: how many of us want to risk our liberty or possessions on one act of defiance? Yet civil disobedience has become one of the most powerful forms of doing nothing (avoiding certain actions) the world has ever seen.

Thoreau remains highly relevant, for we are not far from the problems he sought to address. His emphasis on frugality and turning ones back on the material world is a fresh insight in a world of economic trouble. Indeed, interest in Thoreau peaks around economic crises: during the depression in the 1930s, his philosophy became especially popular in America. Yetas Thoreau would probably argueit should not take a severe crisis for us to question a materialistic life.

We can also continue to learn from his appreciation for nature and the psychological possibilities it offers. Thoreau later became a patron saint of the environmental movement; the Sierra Clubone of the largest environmental organisations in Americauses Thoreaus slogan, In wildness is the preservation of the world, as their guiding mantra.

After he left Walden, Thoreau travelled widely, spent time working as a surveyor, and published many more essays, especially about the environment. He had struggled with tuberculosis since his college years, and fell ill with it yet again after an outing to count tree rings. He died three years later in 1862, aged only 44. However, his works endure, and remind us of just how important it is to remove the distractions of money, technology, and other peoples views in order to live according to our inner nature.