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ENGL 400-15

Journal Entry #3: Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience"

1) Why would Thoreau's essay be called "Civil Disobedience"?

The essay is called "Civil Disobedience" because he argues that humans should not allow government to impose too much such up to the point to where individuals are deprived from conscience, which are emotional and rational associations based on a person's morals and values.

2) According to Thoreau, what is the definition of a government?

According to Thoreau, government is the type of method the society has chosen to represent their will. But most of the time, governments are inefficient and immoral as they abuse of their power. Therefore, his definition of a real government is a government that would practice respect for everyone by executing people's will.

3) Thoreau suggests that "We should be men first, and subjects afterward." What is the difference between the two? Why do you think Thoreau makes this suggestion?

Thoreau suggests that "We should be men first, and subjects afterward", because he states that as human beings, we are naturally right to do what we think is best for us and in our own terms of what is right. In this case, "we should be men first" means that individuals should be able to decide for themselves and not be treated as an object. In that quote, Thoreau is emphasizing the respect for people and for ourselves. In order to explain that statement he gave, Thoreau utilizes the example of the soldiers marching all very organized and synchronized on their way to battleground. Thoreau then says that they are unaware of the business they are enrolled into. They are no longer men, instead they are like movable machines at someone else's service of an unethical individual. With this example, he wants to explain that everyone should act in such a way that you treat others always as an end and never as a means for achieving an end. Treating people as a means only, is no different than from a mere thing.

4) Do you think Thoreau looks down on soldiers, captains, generals, etc? Support your answer with textual evidence (from what he actually says in his essay).

I do think that Thoreau feels pity for them because he sees that someone else have power over them. The following quote: "The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies." (Thoreau, par. 5), portrays that these people are not free to act as they want, instead they look like machines that have been coded or programed to follow a pattern or direction without questioning. Their souls have become a shadow of their bodies as their privileges to moral sense have been denied.

5) What examples does he cite of conscientious men that were made the enemies of society (but were later vindicated and are now held in high esteem)?

Thoreau cites Christ, Copernicus, Luther, Washington, and Franklin.

6) How does Thoreau exercise "civil disobedience"? What happens as a result? Does his action fit in with your view of active citizenship? What else would you have done if you were in his shoes during his time period?

He decides not to pay poll taxes for 6 years as a result he has to spend one night in jail. I don't think his actions fits in idea of active citizenship. I consider that not paying taxes is not the best way to be a leader in society by making a difference. In this case not paying taxes, did not make any good for anyone. There are other ways to approach problems. If I was him, I would have initially paid taxes, but find another solution to fight against the government. That is not a way to solve a problem, to fix something you need to grow yourself out of the problem, not make it worse.