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1

The conscience on fire: Thoreau's anarchist ethic

*My thoughts are murder to the State, and involuntarily
go plotting against her.*

HENRY DAVID THOREAU in "Slavery in Massachusetts"

*The good man, the man who infects hardly anyone, is the man
who has the fewest lapses of attention.*

ALBERT CAMUS, *The Plague*

*You will understand that to remain a servant of the written law
is to place yourself every day in opposition to the law of
conscience, and to make a bargain on the wrong side; and
since this struggle cannot go on forever, you will either
silence your conscience and become a scoundrel, or you will
break with tradition, and you will work with us for the
utter destruction of all this injustice, economic, social, and
political. But then you will be a revolutionist.*

PETER KROPOTKIN

I

Many stories have been told about Henry David Thoreau. His 44-year life has proved rich material for ideological contestations that stretch from at least his death in 1862 up to the present. What Thoreau's detractors and devotees

agree on is that he was an iconoclast bent on breaking with conventions prevailing in Massachusetts social circles. What divides them is how they assess this break—the reasons, the extent, and the effects. For persons sure that American democracy is the last best hope for humanity, either Thoreau is not a democratic thinker and must be discarded, or his thought and action must be translated into an idiom that vindicates his democratic credentials. Hannah Arendt belongs to the former class while Nancy Rosenblum and George Kateb can be cast as principal players in the latter role. For persons certain that religious, supernatural, theological, or metaphysical ideas or orientations represent barriers to social progress, Thoreau must either be cast as a thoroughgoing naturalist or cast aside.

My aim here is to portray Thoreau's commitments in a way that calls into question prevailing stories about him. Taking my cue from political theorists and social critics, such as Isaiah Berlin, whose work stress the centrality of anthropological questions in modern political and social thought, my sense is that we will best apprehend Thoreau's political philosophical commitments if we familiarize ourselves with his ideas about the human person, the moral order, and the divine.

Let me begin this story, then, by trying to convince you that we must take seriously Thoreau's religion, which means turning to Thoreau's nineteenth-century milieu. His idiosyncrasies and iconoclasm notwithstanding, Thoreau had fellow religious travelers and his unconventional flourishes are best understood in relation to them. Born in 1817, Thoreau came of age in the 1830s, arriving for undergraduate study at Harvard College just as Transcendentalism and abolitionism were shaking up New England's educational, religious, political, and cultural life.

Transcendentalism emerged in the midst of religious revivalism, heated theological controversy, cultural contestations about the meaning of America, and political conflict that always teetered on the edge of violence. Such times are made for passionate ethical striving. Appropriately, as the nineteenth century progressed, "more and more, [American] religious thought was devoted to questions of ethics."¹ And as ethics or ethical questions pervaded religious discourse, quite naturally, theological questions about the nature of the human person—theological anthropological questions—assumed growing significance. According to Lewis Perry, "The conclusion seemed irresistible [among certain theologians and clerics] in the new republic: if God was lawgiver, then he must have implanted both knowledge of the law and the capacity to fulfill it in the constitution of man."²

The ethical turn in early to mid-nineteenth-century American religious thought had far-reaching effects on New England's religious practice and social life in general. In fact, the conclusion that God endowed human persons with the knowledge of and capacity to fulfill the moral law can be understood as both a cause and effect of antislavery and abolitionist activism. Moral controversy about race-based chattel slavery instigated

religious debate about the nature of God, the moral order, political order, and human identity and nature. And for persons—from David Walker to William Lloyd Garrison to John Brown—convinced that black Africans were creatures of God and that slavery constituted an affront against God and God's law, religious fervor manifested as prophetic social criticism and activism. New England enthusiasts such as James and Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Peabody, Margaret Fuller, Orestes Brownson, Wendell Phillips, Theodore Parker, and Bronson Alcott would found congregations, schools, newspapers, journals, reform organizations, and communes during our period, and so greatly effect American religious and activist life during antebellum and beyond.

All of this is important for our consideration because, while American Transcendentalism has been remembered mostly for its lasting contributions to (secular) American literature, the movement actually began in the 1830s among ministers and religionists dissatisfied with the extent of reform enacted by Unitarian Congregationalists, so that in many respects Transcendentalism started off as a Christian-dissident uprising focused on theology and theological anthropological disputes. Accordingly, several early participants in the "Transcendentalist Club" meetings—Frederick Henry Hedge, Ralph Emerson, George Ripley, and William Henry Channing—were first and foremost religious reformers, extending liberal and Unitarian strands of Congregationalism in radical directions.

American Transcendentalists were notoriously independent individualists, which militated against Transcendentalism's sustenance, over time, as a cohesive movement. But what united the disparate figures now routinely referred to as Transcendentalists were the theological anthropological assumptions that they eventually embraced. In short, Transcendentalists, Thoreau included, broke with Calvinist theology and theological anthropology. Inspired by Quakerism, the European Enlightenment, and German and English Romantics, the Transcendentalists had no place for the Calvinist's pessimistic view of postlapsarian human nature and the concomitant emphasis on the permeation of sin and "total depravity of man."³ Significantly, American Transcendentalists replaced the Calvinist emphasis on sin-sick selves with a view of the "divine in all."⁴ Lawrence Buell, correctly in my view, goes so far as to aver that "the central message of Transcendentalism itself [was] the idea of divine immanence."⁵

The trend toward radicalism among Transcendentalists gained momentum during Thoreau's final years at Harvard. He graduated in 1837, one year after and one year before Ralph Waldo Emerson published his groundbreaking masterpiece *Nature* and delivered his subversive "Divinity School Address" at Harvard, two statements spelling out the Transcendentalist theological and philosophical tenor: the divine rests both within nature and each individual, and "intuition" as opposed to revelation represents how humans arrive at truth. This basic proposition rests at the heart of Thoreau's religious

imagination and any effort to understand his religiosity or his political philosophy must be attuned to Thoreau's meditations on the nature of the self and its relation to the divine—that is, his theological anthropology. Thoreau's wordplay, affinity for paradox and irony, aversion to systematicity, and reputation as a naturalist make attunement difficult.

Still, if we tend to Thoreau's theological statements with care, it will be hard to miss his profound religious sensibility, a sensibility rooted in a conception of a divine being. His complex religious views extend from his unorthodox conception of God; he explicitly expresses a belief in God, even if there is often ambiguity when he does so. This is no clearer than in a letter written to Harrison Gray Otis Blake, his spiritual companion, where Thoreau proclaims: "God Reigns! I say God. I am not sure that is the name. You know who I mean."⁶

As is often the case, this instance of ambiguity, the fruit of a fallibilistic impulse, is revealing, as subtle hints of Thoreau's mysticism come to the fore. The mystic, of course, is both overwhelmed by exposure to the deity and burdened by an inability to wholly grasp the nature of the deity. The "being" whose reign is known, yet whose name and nature is not, is the infinitely complex being that is typically referred to as God. The mystic knows better than to say whether the name that is typically bestowed on the being is the name that ought to be bestowed. Thoreau's terse statement to Blake is not necessarily an enunciation of a mystic's religious knowledge, but it does betray the inclinations of a mystic.

Thoreau's faith in the existence of God, and belief in the human person's capacity to know and experience this God, is especially on display in *A Week*, published in 1849, where Thoreau converts into prose his sensual encounter with the Divine, or the divine self, what Thoreau will refer to as "that everlasting Something":

I see, smell, taste, hear, feel, that everlasting Something to which we are allied, at once our maker, our abode, our destiny, our very Selves; the one historic truth, the most remarkable fact which can become the distinct and uninvited subject of our thought, the actual glory of the universe; the only fact which a human being cannot avoid recognizing, or in some way forget or dispense with.⁷

And in *Walden*, published in 1854, Thoreau conveys a similar sentiment:

I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than it is you.⁸

These pithy statements, essential to understanding Thoreau's thought, constitute a window not only into Thoreauvian theology but also Thoreau's epistemology and ontology, that is, his understanding of how and what persons can know about the character of reality (God) and the constitution of the self. Thoreau, in mystical form, is moved by faith and inspired by experience: in addition to being humbly confident that God reigns, he is conscious of the fact that God reigns with or even within the self; for, Thoreau knows that we are allied to "that everlasting Something" which is "our very Selves."⁹ While not predominant in Thoreau's New England or America, a variant of this theological view constituted a distinctive feature of American Transcendentalist (transcendentalist) thought and caused much controversy in mid-nineteenth-century New England religious circles.¹⁰

The importance of this theological (anthropological) view, especially for the purposes of my analysis, lies in the implications that it had for questions of legitimate authority, particularly in relation to ecclesiology, church polity, politics, and ethics. Not only did the idea of "divine in all" or "divine immanence" extend the Protestant Reformation idea of a "priesthood of believers," undermining respect for traditional priestly authority, which I will say more about shortly, it also set the stage for an evasion of several ethical, particularly metaethical, dilemmas confronted by theologians and philosophers during the nineteenth century. By deifying the self, that is, locating God within the self, Transcendentalists were able to sidestep moral skepticism and avoid being too disturbed by cultural relativism.

Significantly, conceptions of God seem to presuppose the idea of worship. In the purest sense worship is the complete devotion to an object. In the case of religious worship, a deity or deities are typically the objects of worship. Religious theists take their respective gods to demand a host of acts, including sacrificial offerings, prayers, salutations, and so on. To be devoted completely to a given God or gods requires the performance of the appropriate act or range of acts. Akin to many religiously inspired social activists, Thoreau's religiosity does not primarily entail the performance of the kind of acts listed above. Instead, Thoreau is devoted to a God that demands moral self-perfection and adherence to moral laws that are fundamentally about the proper way to treat animate and inanimate beings. His religiosity, then, is profoundly ethical.

Thoreau may be unsure about the reigning deity's name, but he is resolute about the deity's role. Thoreau's God is the *ultimate* moral judge. As well, Thoreau, after stoics and deists, believes God to have created a world wherein nature, including human persons, is suffuse with moral meaning. The epistemological debates and attendant uncertainties that the Enlightenment and cross-cultural encounters had instigated in European thought did not undermine Thoreau's certitude with respect to moral truth. In fact, similar to later religious pluralists, Thoreau found themes unifying the diverse religious and social practices across the world, so that the areas

of overlapping interest or agreement among diverse religions served to reinforce his moral stance. For Thoreau, reflecting on the character of human personality, society, and the natural environment discloses moral truth. So he rhetorically asks, “May we not see God? Are we to be put off and amused in this life, as it were with a mere allegory? Is not Nature, rightly read, that of which she is commonly taken to be the symbol merely?”¹¹ Thoreau insists that moral truth is God’s truth and each person has the capacity—call it reason or conscience if you would like—to discern it.¹² Conscience is God’s gift to humanity and the human person’s guide on the path upward—higher living in accord with the higher law.

Thoreau’s belief in God, objective moral truth, and human capacity to know come together in an evocative passage in *A Week*:

I must conclude that Conscience, if that be the name of it, was not given us for no purpose, or for hindrance. However flattering order and expediency may look, it is but the repose of a lethargy, and we will choose rather to be awake, though it be stormy, and maintain ourselves on this earth and in this life, as we may, without signing our death-warrant. Let us see if we cannot stay here, where He has put us, on his own conditions. Does not his law reach as far as his light? The expedients of the nations clash with one another, only the absolutely right is expedient for all.¹³

Thoreau asserts that God is lawgiver, maintains that God’s law determines absolute rightness, and contends that human persons, through “Conscience,” can know God’s law. Thoreau thinks that human beings are called to *become* moral and he fervently believes in the capacity of individuals to realize moral truths; knowing that we (human beings) *are* divine moral beings points toward what we should *do*. Yet he adds an important contention: recognition of God’s law and, subsequently, the will to abide by it hinge on the prior choice to “be awake, though it be stormy.”

Surrounded by neighbors who, in practice, have not chosen wakefulness, who have not determined to stay where God has put them, on God’s conditions, at every turn Thoreau is confronted with actual behavior and social practices that appear to contradict his epistemological and ontological claims. Thoreau insists that “men do not fail commonly for want of knowledge.” However, as Thoreau intimates in *A Week*, they do “want of prudence to give wisdom preference.” Why is this? According to Thoreau, we struggle to give wisdom preference because we often establish “durable and harmonious [routines that] . . . all parts of [our] nature consent to.”¹⁴ So, on Thoreau’s view, persons’ failure to choose wakefulness is largely the effect of their having fallen into certain routines. The most detrimental routines and habits are often those enforced or imposed by social institutions, customs, and norms. Over time, such routines obfuscate

important moral truths, particularly truths about the self, and too often such routines and habits deny in practice the value of the human person and the richness of individuality, encouraging the blind conformity and moral complacency that is constitutive of slumber.

It is to this problem of slumber that Thoreau answers in his vocation. Similar to other American Transcendentalists, from Elizabeth Peabody to Theodore Parker to Amos Bronson Alcott, Thoreau engages in what Jeffrey Steele names "rhetorics [*sic*] of regeneration," which amounts to a call for a "recovery of the self, as if from illness."¹⁵ "Rhetorics of regeneration" or calls for conversion almost by definition sustain themselves on appeals to the unrealized, or what Ralph Waldo Emerson wonderfully refers to as the "unattained attainable self." For Thoreau, then, the posited self possesses powers wanting recovery. Thoreau's regeneration rhetoric serves as a moral conversion narrative that attests to what is in fact possible and aims to inspire self-improvement, self-reform, or self-culture, and so represents a remedy for the slumbering.

Walden, a text devoted to delving into this issue of slumber, aptly begins with Thoreau's well-known declaration: "I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up."¹⁶ Convinced that "moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep," Thoreau embarks on a project of moral reform that consists in waking neighbors up.¹⁷ Indeed, while Thoreau collates myriad themes in *Walden*, perhaps none rises to the level of importance of the awakening motif that is reiterated throughout. *Walden* oscillates here and there between lamentation and hopefulness, as is appropriate for prophetic prose. Implicit is a complaint about the present predicated on knowledge of a possible alternative world; the text's opening premise is that there is unrealized promise. *Walden's* narrator chronicles unfulfilled potential and thus testifies to the possibility of regeneration and conversion. It is for good reason that Thoreau's stay at Walden's Pond has been variously described as a spiritual retreat, a pilgrimage, and a quest for spiritual renewal and awakening.

Critical reflection on living well inspired his sojourn adjacent to that Concord pond. And critically reflecting on his life in the woods provided Thoreau with the material (experience) necessary to engage in rhetorics of regeneration. His task was to demonstrate in practice the veracity of his bold claims about the self, to vindicate his own faith in humanity. Persons are called to acknowledge their higher selves and to act in ways that accord with such selves. Taking for granted that there are a "mass of men," particularly in New England, who desire transformation yet wrongly doubt its possibility, Thoreau speaks to those persons who wish for a more meaningful existence, "to the mass of men who are discontented, and idly complaining of the hardness of their lot or of the times, when they might improve them."¹⁸ Thoreau, of course, insists that awakening is possible and claims to know of

“no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor.”¹⁹

Each reader is invited to follow Thoreau’s lead, to explore his or her self in relation to social institutions and practices, the natural environment, and his or her own web of beliefs about the self, world, and deity. Thoreau endeavors to identify beliefs and practices or ways of being that edify and enhance and those that degrade and diminish moral life. Not unlike other nineteenth-century reformers and social critics, Thoreau identifies tradition—religious, economic, and political—and habits of consumption as primary barriers to moral reform. Tradition, in Thoreauvian parlance, stands for those practices that misidentify the limit of human potentiality and misconstrue the character of moral truth or rightness, thus engendering or imposing conformity and obedience to ineffective or immoral standards and practices. And when defending social practices and institutions (routines), persons, particularly apologists, nearly always presuppose certain limitations and by extension assert particular necessities, so as to engender and impose conformity and obedience.

Persons often present and accept mere conjecture about limitations as actual knowledge of limits. Thoreau illustrates the importance of this facet of social life through a parable that he derives from the conjecture on the subject of the qualities and properties of Walden’s Pond. How persons relate to ponds, especially in terms of knowledge, is representative or symbolic of how they relate to the world—social or natural—generally speaking: “The pond rises and falls, but whether regularly or not, and within what period, nobody knows, though, as usual, many pretend to know.”²⁰ Such conjecture is problematic insofar as it tends to distort (our conception of) reality and undermine our ability to know. Reflecting on the “stories” exchanged about Walden’s Pond, Thoreau gets at how vital it is to traverse boundaries through experimentation and exploration, acts which presuppose ignorance: “There have been many stories told about the bottom, or rather no bottom, of this pond, which certainly had no foundation for themselves. It is remarkable how long men will believe in the bottomlessness of a pond without taking the trouble to sound it. I have visited two such Bottomless Ponds in one walk in this neighborhood.”²¹

This connects to the problem of slumber in that the slumbering conform and obey blindly, and eventually lose sight of the role that choice plays in determining their character and the character of their experience; in this way, persons experience alienation²² and relinquish subjectivity and individuality, which is tantamount to denying the divinity that resides within each person. Conceptions and ideals about the self attract so much of Thoreau’s attention because, on his view, “What a man thinks of himself, that it is which determines, or rather indicates, his fate.”²³ To slumber is to accept a false limit, to make a dead law one’s own law; because we slumber—blindly conform and obey—“man’s capacities have never been measured;

nor are we to judge what he can do by any precedents, so little has been tried.”²⁴ In turn, evil, unjust, and ineffective practices such as those which were pervasive in nineteenth-century North Atlantic societies—with the continuation of colonialism, imperial conquest, slave economies, patriarchal oppression, and the emergence of modern industry—are often defended or rationalized by appeals to necessity and perpetuated on the basis of the cooperation of the slumbering, those who do not go through the trouble of discovering the truth.

As we might expect, Thoreau demands proof that our routines, habits, traditions are necessary for a meaningful human life and he insists that individuals, as divine beings, are moral subjects who must exercise moral agency, thus making moral decisions about how to live and which acts to perform or not perform in certain situations. In short, Thoreau advocates reclamation of moral responsibility. The opening pages of *Walden* register this advocacy:

When we consider what, to use the words of the catechism, is the chief end of man, and what are the true necessities and means of life, 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. But alert and healthy natures remember that the sun rose clear . . . No way of thinking or doing, however, ancient, can be trusted without proof.²⁵

Thoreau sojourns at Walden's Pond in order to “learn what are the gross necessities of life and what methods have been taken to obtain them” and so authenticate his social criticism by providing proof that certain habits, practices, and institutions that are often presented as natural or necessary are in fact dispensable.²⁶ He accomplishes this by illustrating the way in which our habits, practices, and institutions create a false sense of what is necessary. Making use of his life on the frontier, a life of simplicity, Thoreau aspires to get an objective view of the social life of most New Englanders, townspersons and farmers alike, by comparing it to his simple living at Walden's Pond.

The first part of *Walden* is fittingly entitled “Economy.” By beginning thus, Thoreau acknowledges the importance of economic matters to human striving, and yet at the same time calls into question the economic theories and practices prevalent in America during the 1840s and 1850s. The decision to discuss the basic “necessaries” (necessities) of life under the title “economy” is meant to highlight the fact that (1) basic necessities are, as a factual matter, particular means to certain ends and (2) economic interests are rooted (or at least originate) in needs. After contemplating what is essential to bodily well-being and considering the purposes served by primary goods, Thoreau concludes that, at bottom, primary goods are required so that persons can

“maintain their vital heat” and he homes in on three primary goods—food, clothing, and shelter.

These three goods are the means necessary for sustenance and societies are often organized around procuring them. And this is as it should be. Yet almost invariably, “even in democratic New England towns,” persons allow these means to become ends and thus devote more time (life) to their pursuit than is actually necessary. In New England, says Thoreau, “men have become tools of their tools”²⁷ and “we do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us.”²⁸ Institutional practices turn out or bring into being persons with viscous appetites and thus unhealthy consumptive habits; and persons with such appetites and habits themselves generate inefficient and unjust modes of action and institutional practices. Most problematic, though, is the fact that all of this engenders unreflective behavior that in turn facilitates the process by which human persons become tools, so that human subjects are transformed into objects.

Thoreau’s emphasis on the role that consumptive habits play in this process is a distinctive feature of his social analysis. Consumption matters for Thoreau in part because matters of consumption (1) are so intertwined in the final analysis with how we relate to other human beings and to the natural environment and (2) determine the kinds of institutions that we will likely deem necessary. Our sensual desires, when unchecked, undoubtedly have dire social implications. The greedy often claim to need slaves. The same is true of imperial and colonial masters with respect to colonial subjects. Thoreau’s insight about the relation of consumptive habits and greed to economic exploitation and political oppression is unoriginal yet key to understanding his thought. When he claims that “the luxury of one class is counterbalanced by the indigence of another,” observes that “on the one side is the palace, on the other are the almshouse and ‘silent poor,’” and cites the wars fought in order to secure a low price for sugar, to sweeten tea, he is diagnosing a problematic—the modern predicament—that his normative social vision is framed to eradicate.²⁹

Sugar no longer significantly shapes the foreign policies of territorial states. But goods such as oil have replaced it. And so unbounded appetite or desire, call it gluttony, nonetheless invades the realm of the political and ordinarily wreaks violence. As Thoreau says toward the end of *Walden*, undoubtedly thinking about imperialist America and European colonial powers such as Britain and France: “The gross feeder is a man in the larva state; and there are whole nations in that condition, nations without fancy or imagination, whose vast abdomens betray them.”³⁰

It is in such a milieu—of rampant materialism, economic exploitation, and political oppression—that Thoreau commends asceticism, a central aspect of his ethics, and a fundamental component of his conception of philosophy. Thoreau, in *Walden*, tells the reader that the philosopher practices “better methods” of practical living than others in that the philosopher accords

goods their appropriate place and loves “wisdom so as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust.”³¹ The philosopher possesses the prudence to give wisdom preference. Philosophers are awake and wise. And wisdom dictates a simple life—the life of an ascetic. For Thoreau, then, the philosopher is by definition an ascetic. Three terse lines illuminate the character of Thoreauvian asceticism and the reason(s) that Thoreau regards asceticism as imperative. To begin, according to Thoreau, “None can be an impartial or wise observer of human life but from the vantage ground of what *we* should call voluntary poverty.”³² Further, voluntary poverty is viable only when one minimizes one’s consumption and one’s participation in economic trade or exchange. In his standard ironic tone, Thoreau announces his resistance to and rejection of conventional (entrepreneurial) wisdom: “Instead of studying how to make it worth men’s while to buy my baskets, I studied rather how to avoid the necessity of selling them.”³³ And finally, Thoreau crafts a fresh proverb in order to underscore his larger point about the philosopher’s methods of living: “A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.”³⁴

These are not just catchy phrases. Again, asceticism rests near the heart of Thoreau’s ethics and Thoreau prescribes asceticism or simple living for a mélange of profoundly important reasons. It provides clarity of thought and the freedom of action that comes with having little vested interest in extant unjust conditions, which makes it possible to avoid complicity with injustice.³⁵ Asceticism, then, is a technique for attaining clear-sightedness or impartiality. It thereby furnishes a context in which an authentic self and authentic need can be disclosed, setting the stage for the maximization of moral and material independence. In other words, asceticism is therapy for slumbering souls, numb to the world, a way to erase the distance between oneself and God and the divine within one’s self. So Thoreau declares,

Chastity is the flowering of man; and what are called Genius, Heroism, Holiness, and the like, are but various fruits which succeed it. Man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open. By turns our purity inspires and our impurity casts us down. He is blessed who is assured that the animal in him is dying out day by day, and the divine being established.³⁶

Thoreau wants his readers, especially those leading “lives of quiet desperation,” to appreciate that an ascetic life is possible in practice and to see that it makes achievable the awakening that is (or should be) desired and is needed. He takes for granted our divine nature and then attempts to convince us that divine beings ought to have chosen better methods of living than most of us have; Thoreau-the-philosopher (tentatively) illuminates what it is to be human and provides instructions as to how to become fully what one is. Set aside whether or not it is practically possible for Thoreau’s

readers, having reflected on his prodding, to embark upon the kind of sojourn that is the object of reflection in *Walden*. To a degree, Thoreau's primary aim is to, through Socratic questioning and (sometimes ironic) rumination, spur self-examination and reconsideration of the given, including the character of the self. Thoreau's faith is that such examination will lead to better choices or reformed ways of individual and collective being.

This last point is vital since so many political realists, postmodern theorists, and anti-Kantian thinkers, in recent years, tend to conflate talk about noncomplicity with naive quests for (self-centered) purity; reduce celebrations of the individual or individuality to asocial solipsism; and to dismiss any talk about ascetic withdrawal as (self-centered) escapism.³⁷ Thoreau has been charged with the above vices periodically for decades and one virtue of the story that I am telling about him is that it concentrates on aspects of his thought that contest these charges and invites a reconsideration of the tendency among so many contemporary critical thinkers to disparage individuality, autonomy, inwardness, deontological ethics, and other values that are often associated with but are not the exclusive province of liberal or Kantian thought. To be clear, my goal here is not to defend Immanuel Kant or political liberals such as John Rawls. Yet I do mean to show that while Thoreau is a proponent of individuality, inwardness, introspection, and perhaps even conscientious self-isolation, he does not regard a turn inward and away as a means by which to avoid dealing with the corrupt and unjust character of a given society's institutional practices and arrangements. Rather, as John L. Thomas notes, the Transcendentalists, Thoreau included, "turned inward to examine the divine self and find there the material with which to rebuild society."³⁸ For Transcendentalist reformers, the turn inward and away facilitates the cultivation of habits, attitudes, and ethoi that themselves reform or revolutionize the social world. In this way, the inward turn and movement away is always already socially and politically charged.

Thoreau stands out among Transcendentalists for the sustained way in which he fastidiously accounts for how slumbering occurs and how awakening might be realized. As we take the next turn in this story about Thoreau's life and thought, the concern will be with how the moral conversion or awakening that Thoreau aspires to instigate implicates the political and connects directly to the modern territorial state. In the coming sections I show that awakening is connected to the territorial state in that, from Thoreau's vantage, few institutions play as negative a role in the moral degradation and oppression of individuals as does the modern territorial state. The territorial state is problematic because of (1) the way in which it oppresses large segments of the human population and (2) the way in which cooperation with and agency on behalf of the state stymies moral sensibility. The territorial state, Thoreau suggests, is unnecessary, at least for the morally conscientious, so that awakening implies or entails political resistance.³⁹ This basic descriptive account and understanding of the territorial state

prevails throughout Thoreau's writings and activist career. And we should keep this fact about Thoreau's conception of the state in mind when reading and reflecting on *A Week* and *Walden*, as doing so allows us to appreciate the political implications of the claims presented in these texts. If I have so far presented them as religious texts about the divine status of the human person, this is because on some levels they are and because the task up to this point has been to present Thoreau's too often neglected religiosity. We are now ready to take note of Thoreau's prophetic voice as it reverberates in the political domain, proving true Isaiah Berlin's insight that "our political notions are part of our conception of what it is to be human," and showing how Thoreau's principal texts, especially *Walden*, double as religious and political tracts, with the political shadowing the religious and vice versa.⁴⁰

II

Few dates could be more politically significant than the date on which Thoreau chose to relocate to those now famous Concord woods. Thoreau moved to Walden's Pond on July 4, 1845.⁴¹ And his decision to withdraw to the woods on such a politically significant date should inform the meaning that we attribute to his withdrawal and guide how we interpret the masterpiece that he crafted while sojourning in the woods. We can understand him to have been declaring his independence from the United States of America on the very anniversary of Americans' declaration of independence from King George's Britain. In the midst of the entrenchment of Jacksonian democracy, the rise of James Polk and imperialist expansion, and the consolidation of the Southern slaveholder's aristocracy, Thoreau set out to demonstrate in practice which purported necessities are true and which are false.

Recognizing that Thoreau includes the territorial state among false necessities and contends that awakening precludes cooperation with it is vital to comprehending Thoreau's political philosophy, which is why it has been essential to delineate Thoreau's theology and theological anthropology and to consider the role of the ideas of slumber, awakening, and false necessity in Thoreau's thought. To make the fact that Thoreau regarded the territorial state as a false necessity clearer, we will have to reflect on his explicit references to and criticisms of the territorial state, law, authority, and political action as they appear in *A Week*, *Walden*, "Resistance to Civil Government," and "Slavery in Massachusetts." Analyzing these works in concert promises to enrich and develop our understanding of Thoreau's political morality and lay bare the anarchist dimension of Thoreauvian ethics.

The character of Thoreau's writing process shaped his oeuvre in ways pertinent to my analysis. He wrote incessantly and was committed to the view that writing is rewriting. Further, he was always working on more

than one piece at a time. In accord with this, Thoreau composed his great political essays at the same time that he was writing (or revising) *A Week* and *Walden*, which undoubtedly accounts for the extensive thematic overlap and continuity with respect to the substantive content in the respective pieces. What's more, because Thoreau shares the prophet's penchant for repetition and reiteration, the argumentative structures in most of his writings bear remarkable resemblance to one another. No less than in *A Week* and *Walden*, in his more explicitly political essays and reform papers, Thoreau calls his audience's attention to (1) the divine nature of persons, (2) the need for awakening, and (3) the injustice of the state. Thoreau consistently takes the problem of slumber as his starting place. And subsequently, in his own way, after his own fashion, he prophesies deliverance. With respect to the political, Thoreau's message is always: The modern state is unjust; it is a false necessity or an inexpedient institution; acting on its behalf makes one an agent of injustice, stultifying one's moral sense; awakening entails noncomplicity with unjust practices, renunciation of false necessities, heightened moral sensitivity, and thus the elimination of the territorial state.

Thoreau's criticism of the political realm largely constitutes an attempt to demystify and demythologize standing political institutions and practices. In particular, he subverts predominant myths about the law and state officials by offering descriptions of the function of the former and the latter that counter conventional accounts. Rulers, says Thoreau, have claimed that in order to be morally good, one must comply with the law, that is, one must be law abiding. Such rulers have insisted that obedience to positive laws of the state is a precondition to realization of individual moral virtuousness and also the common good. But in actual fact, says Thoreau, blindly complying with the laws or commands issued by political authorities merely impedes the realization of just conditions; it perpetuates injustice. And to respect the law and to comply with or to labor on behalf of the state is to surrender one's moral autonomy, induce slumber, and become an agent of injustice.

Thoreau makes this point in several evocative passages that are worth quoting at length. His charge in "Resistance to Civil Government" is especially direct:

It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right. Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it even the well-disposed are daily made agents of injustice. A common and natural result of an undue respect for law is, that you may see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, privates, powder-monkeys and all, marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, aye, against their common sense and consciences, which makes it very steep marching indeed, and produces a palpitation of the heart. They have no doubt that it is a damnable business

in which they are concerned. . . . Now, what are they? Men at all? or small moveable forts and magazines at the service of some unscrupulous man in power?⁴²

The mass of men serve the State thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia, jailers, constables, *posse comitatus*, and company. In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on the level with wood and earth and stones, and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well. Such command no more respect than men of straw, or a lump of dirt.⁴³

This passage can be interpreted in the light of Thoreau's consideration of the detriments of slumber and the impediments to awakening in *Walden*. The territorial state, instead of elevating human social life, initiates a process of alienation; for, by way of "respect for" the law and obedience to the territorial state human persons are transformed into machines who act against conscience rather than with it. With the significance of the mutually reinforcing interplay between belief and action in mind, Thoreau plainly states his view of the fact that the territorial state (particularly the American government) is a false necessity. To that end, toward the beginning of "Resistance to Civil Government," Thoreau writes:

[The American] government never itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. It does not keep the country free. It does not settle the West. It does not educate. The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if government had not sometimes got in its way.⁴⁴

Thoreau presents the same idea in *A Week*, in a suggestive passage that flows seamlessly from Thoreau's celebration of "Conscience," which was presented in the earlier section. Read together, the two passages further elucidate the way in which Thoreau's theological and ontological assumptions undergird his political philosophy. In the long but elucidative passage, Thoreau intimates,

To one who habitually endeavors to contemplate the true state of things, the political state can hardly be said to have any existence whatever. . . . In my short experience of human life, the outward obstacles, if there were any such, have not been living men, but the institutions of the dead . . . [And] it is not to be forgotten, that while the law holds fast the thief and murderer, it lets itself go loose. When I have not paid the tax which the State demanded for that protection which I did not want, itself has robbed me; when I have asserted the liberty it presumed to declare, itself

has imprisoned me . . . I do not wish, it happens, to be associated with Massachusetts, either in holding slaves or in conquering Mexico. I am a little better than herself in these respects . . . I love man-kind, but I hate the institutions of the dead un-kind.⁴⁵

Thoreau complains that in an effort to “execute . . . the wills of the dead,” persons are willing to serve as tools. Political officers or officials are most susceptible to the moral detriments of this tendency. While acting as a neighbor, a person will tolerate or even support persons who assert “the value of individual liberty over the merely political commonweal.” But the state necessarily denies this value and persons who serve the state abandon moral virtue in the name of political obedience: “[The state’s] officer, as a living man, may have human virtues and a thought in his brain, but as the tool of an institution, a jailer or constable it may be, he is not a whit superior to his prison key or his staff.” In Thoreau’s view, this phenomenon constitutes a tragedy in that because men are willing to do “outrage to their proper [divine] natures” and “lend themselves to perform the office of inferior and brutal ones,” slavery and war are introduced into social life.⁴⁶

A similar assertion about the modern state and its agents emerges in *Walden*. In particular, in a section entitled “The Village,” Thoreau recounts his arrest for tax refusal and denies the authority of Massachusetts (i.e. the State), referring to it as a “dirty institution” rather than an “institution of the dead,” but the point is the same. Thoreau regards the state as an unjust and inexpedient institution—a false necessity—that molests, jails, and robs the just while slaveholding and wars of conquest go on in its name or with its power:

I was seized and put into jail, because, as I have elsewhere related, I did not pay a tax to, or recognize the authority of, the state which buys and sells men, women, and children, like cattle at the door of its senate-house. I had gone down to the woods for other purposes. But, wherever 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. It is true, I might have resisted forcibly with more or less effect, might have run “amok” against society; but I preferred that society should run “amok” against me, it being the desperate party . . . I was never molested by any person but those who represented the state.⁴⁷

Finally, a few years later, in the essay “Slavery in Massachusetts,” the famed 1854 piece that Thoreau composed as a protest against the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and the trial of runaway slave Anthony Burns, Thoreau once more calls into question the necessity of the territorial state. In particular, he again denies that it, in this case the state of Massachusetts, provides protection and asserts that it fails to effectuate just conditions, two goods

often attributed to state action and pointed to in order to argue for its necessity. Dressing trenchant criticism in his characteristic sarcasm, Thoreau doubts that he needs a governor: "I think that I could manage to get along without one. If he is not of the least use to prevent my being kidnapped, pray of what important use is he likely to be to me? When freedom is most endangered, he dwells in the deepest obscurity."⁴⁸ Still speaking about the governor (of Massachusetts), Thoreau adds: "What I am concerned to know is, that that man's influence and authority were on the side of the slaveholder, and not the slave—of the guilty, and not of the innocent—of injustice, and not of justice."⁴⁹ But not only do territorial states lend their weight to unjust causes, they also imprison many of the only persons actually committed to securing the values that state officials claim as the ends for which the state exists to procure. According to Thoreau, "While the Governor, and the Mayor, and countless officers of the Commonwealth, are at large, the champions of liberty are imprisoned."⁵⁰

The above passages present a basic outline of Thoreau's account of the territorial state and are best understood in relation to Thoreau's emphasis in *Walden* on identifying false necessities and eliminating impediments to a flourishing moral life. As I have already suggested, on Thoreau's view the territorial state—with its governors, judges, and laws—does not in practice serve a positive function. Myth would have us believe that state officials protect freedom and secure justice. Thoreau, of course, contends that the state, in actuality, perpetuates injustice and facilitates alienation.

Especially troubling for Thoreau is the effect that the practices of the territorial state and obedience to it have on our self-conceptions and moral senses—our perceptions or conceptions of human nature and moral truth or rightness. The myths that circulate about the state (political ideology), and the conformity that it engenders, have grave consequences for moral and social life. As Thoreau puts it: "Under the name of order and civil government, we are all made at least to pay homage to and support our own meanness. At the first blush of sin, comes its indifference and from immoral it becomes, as it were, unmoral, and not quite unnecessary to that life which we have made."⁵¹ Under the weight of myth and conformity, then, we become conditioned to condoning what prior to conditioning we would have deemed or demeaned as immoral; we come to regard artificial things as natural, unnecessary institutions as necessary, suffering and cruelty as unavoidable; we degrade ourselves and others, denying our value or dignity; we condone racial apartheid and imperialist wars; we accept (or believe) the territorial state as necessary when it in fact is not; in turn, we do things that we ought not to do.

Thoreau responds to this sociopolitical problematic with a multifold prescription that includes practices that have already been alluded to. These practices can be divided into three categories that deserve enumeration: (1) self-reflection or self-examination, (2) truth-telling or social criticism,

and (3) principled action (and principled action includes asceticism, experimentation, and disobedience). These three interrelated practices (or practice areas) constitute the remedy, the elemental part of Thoreau's moral or social reform program, and can be properly regarded as Thoreauvian religious ethical (religio-ethical) duties, as they all relate back to Thoreau's theology and concomitant theological anthropology (i.e. theologically informed conception of the human person). As I indicated in my earlier consideration of *A Week* and *Walden*, Thoreau believes that accurately describing the character of the self and the effects of our institutional practices are preconditions to the reclamation of moral responsibility and the adoption of alternative practices.

For Thoreau, self-examination, truth-telling (social criticism), and principled action are indispensable to the effort to overcome the complacency and unjust conditions borne of myth and custom. Ultimately, only by self-examination, a recovery of the divinity within and our moral sense—and hence reclamation of moral responsibility—can we be liberated. The expectation, of course, is that self-examination and truth-telling will culminate in principled action, and reflection on this principled action will in turn become the basis for additional truth-telling. These interrelated practices are crucial for the clarity that they bring. They cast light. The light reveals (or even presents) a line of demarcation: are you on the side of justice or injustice?

Examining oneself, contemplating one's purpose and nature, brings into view the character of one's duties, directing one's attention to the moral principles or rules that determine what constitutes just or unjust action. In Thoreau's case, these principles or rules, rooted in his religious impulse, provide the basis for social criticism and determine what constitutes *principled action*. So, for Thoreau, principled action consists of action based on moral rules or principles—doing one's moral duty. The most significant moral duty for our present purposes is the duty to be just or to avoid being an agent of injustice. Importantly, Thoreau's conception of justice is inseparable from his doctrine of noncomplicity. A straightforward articulation of the doctrine of noncomplicity comes in "Resistance to Civil Government":

It is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support. If I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations, I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting on another man's shoulders. I must get off him first, that he may pursue his contemplations too.⁵²

Whether or not this doctrine is onerous, of course, depends on the relative moral sensitivity or rigorousness of the deliberating moral agent. Although

one might invoke a doctrine such as this one in order to exonerate, Thoreau, an ever so rigorous moralizer, invokes it in order to indict. And Thoreau's interest in combating slumber and moral indifference should inform how we interpret, in political philosophical terms, his version of the Golden Rule or ethic of reciprocity and the political disobedience that it motivated.

III

The anarchist implications of Thoreau's doctrine of noncomplicity and tax refusal might elude us if we fail to recognize that Thoreau, not unlike other social activists of his day, embracing voluntarism, regarded the state as one among many voluntary associations. The voluntarist impulse undoubtedly emerged as a salient factor in European social and political affairs in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation. And Europeans' colonization of land in the Americas, especially North America, only intensified this trend, given the disruption of traditional social hierarchies, customs, and practices that migration produced. For our purposes, it is enough to understand the relevance that voluntarism came to have in what is often referred to as the "come-outerism movement," a movement comprised of abolitionists during the early to mid-nineteenth century.⁵³

In that movement, religious reformers, including William Lloyd Garrison, called for persons to "come out" of union with sin and certain Christian denominations and churches—denominations and churches that come-outers took to be committed to an adulterated or corrupt form of Christianity as a result of their support and endorsement of white supremacy and slavery. By the late 1830s activists had turned to calling for individuals to come out of union with government. For example, in 1839, Adin Ballou and several other Christian pacifists, who would later found the Hopedale community, in the publication *Standard of Practical Christianity*, renounced allegiance to "all the governments of the world." At about the same time, Garrison, Bronson Alcott, and George Ripley issued similar separate statements.⁵⁴

To be sure, there are important differences among these figures. Thoreau, for example, while an advocate of "noncooperation" with forces of evil or injustice (noncomplicity), did not base his commitments on the biblical injunction against violence as did "nonresistants" such as Ballou and Garrison. And Garrison and Ballou disagreed with one another about whether or not chattel slavery constituted the principal injustice propagated by the American state or merely one injustice among many. But these differences, while important, should not detract from what the above figures held in common. First, they each responded to state sanctioned racial oppression by commending individual moral responsibility and moral autonomy. In addition, they rigorously applied their ideals of justice and all found the American state wanting. Consequently, they asserted that individual

persons, in virtue of their status as moral agents, created by God, had a moral duty to withdraw support from the modern territorial state. They discussed this duty in terms of “disunion,” “nonresistance,” “noncomplicity,” and “noncooperation.” In this way, they belong to a line of American revolutionaries who, as Staughton Lynd points out, “agree that a political philosophy based on [moral] freedom leads to the reconstruction of society as a voluntary association of individuals” and conceived of government as one “among many voluntary associations.”⁵⁵

Thoreau’s subscription to voluntarism was already evident in 1840, the year that he was confronted by the state of Massachusetts for his refusal to pay the church tax, a tax the payment of which was then required by law. In response, he wrote to the Concord town clerk, informing him that “I, Henry Thoreau, do not wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined.” Akin to other religious reformers and activists in nineteenth-century New England, it would not be long before Thoreau extended his voluntarism so that it included resistance to both the church and the state. By 1842, Thoreau, of course, refused to pay a Massachusetts poll tax in resistance to a government that he believed to be fundamentally unjust in its practices toward Native Americans, Mexicans, and enslaved African Americans. Many who would be unable to identify Thoreau as the author of *Walden* know him for his tax refusal during the 1840s. That political disobedience became the experience that Thoreau immortalized in his classic occasional piece “Resistance to Civil Government.”

Theorists and social critics have often devoted themselves to describing revolutionary action or interpreting revolutions. A list of such theorists includes Kant, Thomas Paine, Edmund Burke, Alexis de Tocqueville, Frederick Douglass, Karl Marx, and Hannah Arendt. Thoreau, perhaps appropriately given his status as a prophet of the American Renaissance, interprets his own action. Thoreau resists the territorial state because “it is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right.” And, again, he maintains that “the only obligation which I have a right to assume, is to do at any time what I think right.”⁵⁶ Consistent with this view, in “Resistance to Civil Government,” Thoreau relates,

It is for no particular item in the tax-bill that I refuse to pay [the poll tax]. I simply wish to refuse allegiance to the State, to withdraw and stand aloof from it effectually. I do not wish to trace the course of my dollar . . . but I am concerned to trace the effects of my allegiance. In fact, I quietly declare war with the State, after my fashion.⁵⁷

The implications of Thoreau’s doctrine of noncomplicity and his descriptive account of the territorial state should be clear. Thoreau’s commitment to the doctrine of noncomplicity and his belief in the revolutionary effect of action

based on principle motivated his resistance to civil government, including his tax refusal. By extension, we can say that the doctrine of noncomplicity underwrites Thoreau's political disobedience and his rejection of the legitimacy of the modern territorial state. Indeed, more to the point, in view of his religious-ethical commitments generally speaking, Thoreau advocates abolishing the territorial state. His most explicit statements to this effect probably come in "Resistance to Civil Government." There Thoreau declares:

I heartily accept the motto—"That government is best which governs least"; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe—"That government is best which governs not at all"; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have. Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient. The objections which have been brought against a standing army, and they are many and weighty, and deserve to prevail, may also at last be brought against a standing government.⁵⁸

And he concludes, "When the friction comes to have its machine, and oppression and robbery are organized, I say, let us not have such a machine any longer."⁵⁹

All of this beckons toward anarchism. Yet just after asserting that arguments against standing armies and standing governments deserve to prevail, Thoreau backs away, seemingly reversing course. Shifting his tone, he writes: "[To] speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for not at once no government, but at once a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it."⁶⁰

Thoreau is often understood to be rejecting anarchism in this passage, where he differentiates himself from no-government men (such as William Lloyd Garrison), and suggests that he wants "at once a better government." But I would like to suggest a different interpretation. A close reading of the text, in its context, reveals that here, where Thoreau seems to be refuting an anarchist thesis, he is in fact articulating the content for an anarchist conception of government. This might seem a strange assertion. In some ways it is. Yet it will appear more plausible if we do at least two things. First, we must keep in mind that anarchism does not entail a rejection of government or political organization; rather, anarchism only entails a rejection of certain forms of government or means of governing.⁶¹ In addition to this, we need to pay careful attention to the kind of government that Thoreau suggests would command his respect.

To solve this puzzle we need only to contemplate the closing paragraphs of the essay, "Resistance to Civil Government." There Thoreau, who had earlier in the essay denounced the American constitution as evil, concedes that one can evaluate institutions from multiple perspectives, including a "lower point of view." In consequence, he acknowledges that it is possible to reach relative moral judgments with respect to certain institutions. However, Thoreau denies that one should rest content with the lower point of view and reiterates his judgment, of the Massachusetts and American states, from a higher plane. He writes,

Seen from a lower point of view, the Constitution, with all its faults, is very good; the law and the courts are very respectable; even this State [Massachusetts] and this American government are, in many respects, very admirable and rare things, to be thankful for, such as a great many have described them; but seen from a point of view a little higher, they are what I have described them; seen from a higher still, and the highest, who shall say what they are, or that they are worth looking at or thinking of at all?⁶²

With faith that social progress is facilitated by achieving the clarity that comes with the higher point of view, Thoreau reaffirms his commitment to higher-level criticism, and articulates the criteria by which he will judge political institutions. That is, he "makes known what kind of government would command his respect," which is a step toward attaining it:

The authority of government, even such as I am willing to submit to . . . is still an impure one: to be strictly just, it must have the sanction and consent of the governed. It can have no right over my person and property but what I concede it.

He goes on,

The progress from an absolute to a limited monarchy, from a limited monarchy to a democracy, is a progress toward a true respect for the individual. Is a democracy, such as we know it, the last improvement possible in government? Is it not possible to take a step further towards recognizing and organizing the rights of man? There will never be a really free and enlightened State, until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly.⁶³

Notice that, in the above, Thoreau is not simply criticizing the American state on account of its defense of slavery, its imperialist militarism, or its domestic repression. Instead, the enunciation of his normative ideal

amounts to an implicit rejection of representational democracy as a form of government. While Thoreau regards the constitutional democracy operative in nineteenth-century America as superior to the political forms that preceded it in European countries, he refuses to regard democracy as mid-nineteenth-century Americans knew it as the best possible *form* of government. The American Revolution did not spell the end of history.

This all points to the fact that a given political philosophical orientation is as much an attitude regarding history (and its present) as it is anything else. The historical gaze gives life to political philosophy and what we look at determines what we see. So in the debate about preferable forms of government, at least with respect to contemporary normative social-political thought, the better part of the weight rests on our evaluations of actual social practices. It is hence of great consequence that Thoreau insists on judging from a "higher view" and calls attention to the dark side of America, constitutional democracy, and modern territorial states.

With respect to America, self-identifying anarchists have focused on the faces at the bottom of the well, the dispossessed, and the excluded. Adopting a critical lens, anarchists insist that any celebration of the American Revolution be accompanied by remembrance of Native Americans, African slaves, lower class Europeans, women. They insist that celebration of the US Constitution be accompanied by an acknowledgment of the considerations that influenced the structure of the constitution; they note the effect that interest in compromise, oppression, conquest—the wars with Native Americans, the Mexicans, the Spaniards, slave aristocracy—had on the configuration of American political institutions. The United States' representational democratic federalism, say anarchists, is as much the by-product of greed and cruelty as anything else. To substantiate this claim, anarchists point to the constitutional debates; analysis of the debates at the constitutional conventions is instructive for what it reveals about the rationale that informed the ultimate structure of the constitution; the quest for an empire and a commitment to maintaining a slave economy are betrayed by the differences between the Articles of Confederation and Perpetuation and the American Constitution. It is reasonable to conclude, on the basis of this history, that the US Constitution was written as a proslavery and proimperialist document. Anarchists refer to the above and more in order to counter claims about the goods that a given territorial state delivers. From the anarchist vantage, it is not clear that the American state is not being used as a tool by the few, to paraphrase Thoreau.

Thoreau's higher view, if I am correct, poses a direct challenge to theorists, including liberal and republican democrats, who maintain the value of representational democratic territorial states on empirical and functional (or instrumental) grounds. Such theorists, of course, assert that the territorial state with its legal regime is valuable for the goods that it provides for human persons. In particular, these theorists contend that a powerful centralized

authority such as the state generates norms and enforces them; it creates and protects indispensable individual human rights and freedoms, which is said to prevent or at least minimize injustice and domination. But, as we have seen, the claim that the territorial state is necessary for the realization and protection of rights and freedom is just the sort of claim that Thoreau rejects.

Thoreau suggests that the state, with its legal regime, is a dead institution that does not in practice serve the function that many theorists assert, so that it can be regarded as a false necessity. It quarrels with and attempts to subjugate foreigners. It taxes and conscripts persons in order to carry out its unjust designs, attempting to make all persons complicit in its unjust practices—it desperately runs amok against those who refuse to support its unjust practices, practices which themselves serve to perpetuate superfluous consumption. Thoreau regards the modern territorial state as a product of superfluous consumption and the practical means (exploitation, oppression, and repression) for the sustenance of such consumption, especially among elites, and contends that serving as an officer of the state is to serve as a “tool of an institution,” which entails acting in ways that are inappropriate (or “not proper”) for a (divine) human being. And since one cannot belong to a political order that engages in systematic domination and oppression—an order that enslaves some, represses some, and invades some—without being diminished from a moral vantage, Thoreau denied that he had benefited from the nineteenth-century American-Massachusetts political order, denied its moral legitimacy, and refused to be associated with or pledge allegiance to it. Thoreau is unequivocal in his negative assessment of the function of modern territorial states, even constitutional democracies. The American constitutional democracy, as inexpedient and as unjust as it was, convinced Thoreau that such a form of government was inadequate (for divine beings); one could not be associated with the territorial state and at the same time be faithful to God and the higher law.

Significantly, Thoreau derives general positive normative principles from his reflection on the particular defects of the American and Massachusetts governments. We might say that the democratic experiments in the Americas revealed or exposed short-comings of constitutional representational democracy and majoritarian or electoral decision-making procedure that molded Thoreau’s idea about the shape that a better form of government would have to take. And, so he asks, “Is it not possible to take a step further towards recognizing and organizing the rights of man?”

Thoreau’s answer to the above question is clear: it is desirable and possible to replace the representational democratic government with some other form and a morally preferable form of government would be a government that individual persons voluntarily consent to in advance of executive action by that government. He thus maintains that political authority, to be legitimate or “strictly just,” must be derived from the explicit consent of

every individual person who is to be subject to the authority in question. All power and authority in a morally acceptable political order would be derived from the "individual as a higher and independent power."

The government, or form of government, that would command Thoreau's respect would be a government that respected persons' moral autonomy such that they were neither oppressed by the government in question nor forced to play a role in oppressing others.⁶⁴ In describing his ideal form of government, Thoreau delineates a form of government that is probably best described in terms of anarchism, as the idea that only mutual consent can generate legitimate political authority and so putative political obligations is constitutive of anarchist thought.

As I noted in the "Introduction," a basic component of anarchism is the assumption that persons are voluntary participants in certain domains of social and political life; persons can become subjects owing certain duties to other persons or institutions only by voluntarily submitting to them. Especially relevant for our purposes is the issue of *political* authority. According to anarchists, political decisions *imposed* from above by others do not give rise to *moral* obligations. Any authority that attempts to impose such decisions on persons is regarded as both unjust and illegitimate.⁶⁵ For anarchists, a political entity is legitimate—perhaps we could say legitimate in the fullest sense—only insofar as the entity in question operates based on the explicit consent of persons said to be subject to that entity's authority. Anarchists, then, reject the legitimacy of the territorial state owing to a theory about the function of the state as a facilitator of economic exploitation and domination generally speaking, both as a domestic and international matter, and because of the way in which territorial states reach decisions about law and policy. It should be clear that Thoreau's religious-political ethic involves a commitment to noncomplicity that includes a duty to dissociate from political regimes that are systemically unjust either in the laws and policies they enact, the decision-making processes that they adopt, or the way in which their laws and policies are implemented or enforced. In the end, Thoreau rejected constitutional democracy because he concluded that moral life in constitutional democratic orders is wanting and because he had a vision of what could and would be if only persons were to heed their callings, that is, answer to the divinity within.⁶⁶ We see now how Thoreau's metaphysics of the self inform his ethics and his political philosophy. Thoreau understands God and religion in ethical terms; he deifies the self; he posits the existence of an objective moral order; and he maintains that human persons have (unmediated) access to moral truth. These moves paved the way for Thoreau's rejection of nonvoluntarist conceptions of political authority. Some reject this vision as utopian, naïve, or unrealistic. And such rejections may be well founded. But this does not undermine the fact that this is Thoreau's vision. On my view, Thoreau's religious-ethical commitment to noncomplicity motivates an anarchist ethic. We can

say, then, that an anarchist government, similar to the one predicted by Proudhon—a government with no master—is the kind of government that would command Thoreau’s respect.

To appreciate why I say this, we should think about how anarchists differ from political liberals in terms of how they assess whether a given political entity is legitimate. Political liberals ordinarily concentrate on the degree to which the state’s procedures adhere to a certain form. This is a preoccupation that political liberals share with anarchists. What separates them is the form that they identify as qualifying as legitimate. In practice, liberal democratic theorists are essentially persons who identify representational democracy as the best form of government and argue that this form, because it is the best form, is legitimate. Anarchists, then, are persons who identify anarchy (or perhaps direct consensus democracy) as the best form of government. Again, I realize that this way of putting it will likely strike most persons as nonsensical. But one of the things that I hope to accomplish in this work is to make clear the degree to which what we contemporaries call anarchism is first a rejection of the legitimacy and thus the authority of modern territorial states, including representative democratic ones, and second a proposal about what form government would have to take in order to be deemed legitimate and so authoritative. My claim about how we should understand anarchism is rooted in my understanding of the importance of the fact the positive political philosophical use of the term anarchism emerged in the mid-nineteenth century with the emergence of the modern territorial state, with Proudhon being the first self-declared anarchist. Anarchists (i.e. modern or contemporary anarchism) have rejected the legitimacy of the modern territorial state and offered concrete alternatives to it.

IV

But even if we concede that Thoreau is an anarchist, there is still the question as to whether he should be classified as a weak anarchist or as a strong anarchist. In the “Introduction,” I suggested that the question as to whether one has a duty to comply with the territorial state can be distinguished from the question about whether or not one has a duty to defy, withdraw from, or seek to eliminate the state. To reiterate, some anarchists, *strong* anarchists, contend that there is a duty to withdraw support from existing territorial states while others, namely *weak* anarchists, do not. Both strong and weak anarchists maintain that there is no general moral duty to obey the law in virtue of its being the law; rather one has a moral duty to consider the substance or content of a given law, or the consequences of compliance, so that one takes into consideration nonlegal moral norms and other practical considerations before determining whether to comply with a given legal or political command. One may have reasons to obey the law, but they are

not reasons that have to do with the law's status as law. What distinguishes *weak* anarchists from *strong* anarchists, then, is that the former do not hold that one has a duty to oppose, to withdraw from, or to seek to eliminate the territorial state.

According to weak anarchists, such as A. John Simmons, some territorial states may on reflection be said to provide social goods that one has a natural duty to support, and so one may support the territorial state as a way of securing those goods. But even in such a case, says Simmons, there is no general moral duty to obey the laws and commands of the state in virtue of their being the laws and commands of the state; one must only obey a political entity if the entity in question exists and operates on the basis of the actual, explicit consent of the governed; in other words, only the fact of individual consent can legitimize political authority; and where there is no legitimate political authority, there are no political obligations per se, which is a stance that probably separates weak anarchists from political liberals and democratic republicans.

Insofar as we concede that anarchists do not reject all forms of political organization, my sense is that Thoreau is best described as a proponent of *strong* anarchism, as he clearly contends that there is a moral duty to withdraw support from the territorial state and maintains that a benefit of doing so is that it will spell the territorial state's demise. However, there is resistance to classifying Thoreau in this way. David Miller, for instance, in his superb text on anarchism, suggests that Thoreau rejects the authority of the modern state yet does not advocate for its elimination. Miller relates that weak anarchism

entails the view that the state has no right to tell me or anyone else how to behave. One can believe this and respond in a wholly passive way, evading inconvenient or immoral state dictates whenever possible and complying with them when forced to do so, but taking no positive action to get rid of the state and having no constructive view about what might take its place. Men like Thoreau would fit roughly into this category.⁶⁷

Miller goes on to point out, correctly, that weak anarchism does not necessarily provide "any recipe for destroying the state or other coercive institutions."⁶⁸

Although Miller's portrayal of weak anarchism more or less mirrors my own, I think that Miller overlooks aspects of Thoreau's sociopolitical vision that, when acknowledged, make it difficult to classify him as a weak anarchist as opposed to a strong anarchist.⁶⁹ It is true that Thoreau did not present a systematic constructive view about what might replace the territorial state. Yet he did in fact specify criteria by which to determine the legitimacy of a given form of government. Further, it is not entirely accurate to suggest, as Miller does, that Thoreau took no positive action

to get rid of the territorial state. To appreciate this latter point, we only need to understand the revolutionary character of Thoreau's doctrine of noncomplicity, his appeal to conscience, and his related tax refusal, facets of Thoreauvian ethics that have been important for modern social movement activists, particularly proponents of nonviolent direct action and nonviolent revolution such as Lev Tolstoy, Mohandas Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Bayard Rustin, and Howard Zinn.

Thoreau's significance for such revolutionaries notwithstanding, the revolutionary and thus stridently political character of his activism have often been unacknowledged. This stems largely from the fact that many interpreters of Thoreau's thought divorce his appeal to conscience from his theological anthropology, his understanding of the state, and his theory of social change, and then charge him with being overly concerned with himself, unconcerned with social suffering and injustice, and passive in the face of injustice. I have already suggested that it is wrong to attribute the vice of individualism or self-centeredness to persons who assert the primacy of moral autonomy. But if one does not appreciate the degree to which Thoreau's social activism and theory of social change are rooted in and connected to a particular conception of conscience, then it is easy to portray him as self-centered and indifferent in the face of injustice.

Hannah Arendt does just this in an essay on political obligation in which she criticizes Thoreau's social engagement. In particular, Arendt frames her criticism of "Thoreau" as a criticism of "conscience" proper. Adopting a rather narrow conception of conscience, Arendt tells her readers that conscience is problematic because it is not "primarily interested in the world where the wrong is committed or in the consequences that the wrong will have for the future course of the world."⁷⁰ And this points to exactly what troubles Arendt when it comes to Thoreau. She finds him insufferably vested in "the rules of conscience." In Arendt's mind, Thoreau's concern with conscience amounts to a problematic preoccupation with the self, or specifically, moral purity. In her words, "the rules of conscience hinge on interest in the self."⁷¹

The self/world dichotomy that Arendt takes for granted undergirds her claim that Thoreau abandons the world for his own sake. Ironically, Arendt cites Thoreau's famed charge, "The people must cease to hold slaves, and to make war on Mexico, though it cost them their existence as a people," as evidence of Thoreau's lack of concern for the "world." And to drive home her point about Thoreau's problematic indifference to worldly concerns, Arendt contrasts Thoreau with Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln, Arendt tells us, offered himself as a sacrifice so as to save the American territorial state, whereas Thoreau prescribed sacrifice in the name of dissolving the Union. That Arendt should criticize Thoreau on account of his response to injustice is ironic, and not simply because one would think that Thoreau's concern for human persons is especially on display in his trenchant criticism of chattel

slavery. It is also ironic in the light of Arendt's having devoted so much of her career as a theorist to arguing for a conception of "the political" that aligns with Thoreau's and anarchists' in interesting ways, a point that I will return to in the conclusion to this book.

For now, though, we simply need to understand why Arendt's description of Thoreau's sociopolitical action fails to capture its moral and political significance. As far as I am concerned, one can only characterize Thoreau as being unconcerned with the world if one assumes two things. First, one must assume that conscience is a private matter. And second, one must assume, as Arendt sometimes seems to, that if one is to show concern for the world, then one should (always) act in a way that improves a *given* political order. In other words, one must assume that a concern about conscience is merely about an inward-looking moral freedom rather than "outward" expression that motivates sociopolitical action aimed at the increase of freedom or justice in the "world."

It should be clear how Thoreau's appeal to conscience differs from the inward-looking, self-absorbed agent that Arendt describes. Thoreau's concern about injustice or wrongs in the world and his desire to undermine unjust practices is given expression through his appeals to conscience and his emphasis on the role that conscience plays in bringing about positive social change. So it is simply untrue that because, unlike Lincoln, Thoreau did not care to "destroy slavery in order to preserve the Union" but to "destroy the Union so as to destroy slavery," he (or his appeal to conscience) was not primarily interested in the world where wrongs are committed. Furthermore, it is untrue that, because Thoreau eschewed traditional formal political participation, he was unconcerned with the (social) world. By understanding how profoundly concerned Thoreau was with wrongs committed in the world, we can begin to understand how thoroughly alienated he was from the American territorial state.⁷² Arendt's narrow conception of conscience precludes her from appreciating this, the character of Thoreau's political vision, and the significance of conscience (or action based on principle) for contemporary social justice activism.⁷³

Because normative ethical prescriptions take on a special value when related to a specific context, it is quite pertinent that Thoreau lived at what might be referred to as the dawn of modernity, in a society with increasingly centralized institutions. He thus came of age in a world in which an injustice anywhere had begun to count as an injustice everywhere, making it quite difficult to wash one's hands of the many wrongs that marked the social world. This aspect of modern life has left many in the modern world feeling impotent in the face of injustice. Yet this same social reality has inspired radical activism too, leaving countless radicals convinced that liberation depends on the acts or action of individual persons.

Such activists have contended that it is in a context in which a centralized entity, such as the territorial state, attempts to universalize complicity

with injustice that individual resistance based on principle—rebellion—can have its most dramatic effect. As Barbara Packer eloquently puts the matter, “Rebellion needs something rigid to overthrow.”⁷⁴ Few things are more rigid than the territorial state’s claim to legitimate authority, which includes the right to issue commands that persons have a duty to obey. Thoreau realized this. So he says, “One would think, that a deliberate and practical denial of its authority was the only offense never contemplated by government.”⁷⁵ It is in the light of this that he would stress the revolutionary implications of moral rigorousness. In a set of lines teeming with urgency, Thoreau dramatizes the significance of principled action and gives voice to a sentiment that has moved radical activists around the world for more than a century: “Action from principle—the perception and the performance of right—changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with any thing which was. It not only divides states and churches, it divides families; aye, it divides the *individual*, separating the diabolical in him from the divine.”⁷⁶

Thoreau’s conception of action from principle is best understood in relation to his doctrine of noncomplicity and his idea of conscience. Right moral action, for Thoreau, involves acting in a way that reflects one’s moral autonomy or freedom; and to be morally virtuous or good entails avoiding complicity in the various forms of social injustice that are propagated daily. And because, as we have seen, for Thoreau, the territorial state was a leading purveyor of social injustice, a person could only be truly free, as a moral matter, when refusing to contribute to the state. In the realm of the political, blind obedience and conformity are the cause of death, destruction, and dehumanization. The oppressed can only attain material freedom—that is, liberation—if persons who contribute to the territorial state cease to do so, which is why Thoreau withdrew his allegiance from the state and refused to pay state taxes. It is in this way that action from principle is essentially revolutionary, changing things and relations.

Notice that the revolutionary character of action from principle parallels the purifying nature of asceticism (or chastity). To a degree, asceticism, as Thoreau relates its meaning, is an example of action from principle. Asceticism can be understood as conscientious consumption in a materialistic capitalist society; it is revolutionary in character because it brings one closer to the divine, changes one’s practices, and thus has a transformative impact on the wider social structure. If in the face of capitalistic economic practices, action from principle entails the life of an ascetic, political disobedience is the form that action from principle takes in the face of territorial state politics. Conscience (and the doctrine of noncomplicity) dictated Thoreau’s resistance to the state and led him to oppose, to withdraw from, and to seek the elimination of the territorial state. It is for this bundle of reasons that Thoreau’s tax refusal, which he based on an appeal to conscience and rooted in the doctrine of noncomplicity, was at bottom revolutionary.

Thoreau maintained that, because the sustenance of the territorial state depends on compliance with it, withdrawing support from it constitutes the most effective means by which to undermine its operation. Consistent with this, in "Resistance to Civil Government," he prophesies: "I know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men whom I could name,—if ten *honest* men only,—aye, if *one* HONEST man, in this State of Massachusetts, *ceasing to hold slaves*, were actually to withdraw from this copartnership, and be locked up in the county jail therefore, it would be the abolition of slavery in America."⁷⁷ Thoreau continues his eloquent appeal,

Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence. A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight. If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate to choose. If a thousand men were not to pay their tax-bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood. This is, in fact, the definition of a peaceable revolution, if any such is possible. If the tax-gatherer, or any other public officer, asks me, as one has done, "But what shall I do?" my answer is, "If you really wish to do any thing, resign your office." When the subject has refused allegiance, and the officer has resigned his office, then the revolution is accomplished.⁷⁸

While his empathy is rarely discussed, the above makes clear that it is precisely because Thoreau is concerned about the so-called world, inclusive of his own self, that he rejects constitutionalism and the majority-principle, and prescribes political disobedience. Thoreau's spirited plea is inspired by compassion and indignation in the face of social suffering and social injustice; he recommends tax refusal because paying taxes "enables the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood." Thoreau's call for moral actors to withdraw support from the state is motivated by an interest in undermining an unjust practice and thus preventing social evils.

Reflecting on Thoreau's ethics in relation to anarchist philosophy elucidates why it is misleading to characterize Thoreau as some sort of egoist and points to an important aspect of anarchism. Anarchism is often referred to as a philosophy of freedom, but too few understand that many anarchists esteem, prescribe, and prioritize moral autonomy and voluntarism for *other-regarding* reasons. Most leading anarchists assert that persons should reject the territorial state's legitimacy and deny its authority because of the fact that the state takes advantage of deference and turns persons into tools that are employed in order to oppress and repress—harm and sometimes kill—other persons. And most religiously motivated anarchists give special emphasis to or make explicit these kinds of other-regarding moral or ethical

reasons for embracing anarchism and conceptions of moral autonomy. Thoreau deserves to be counted among this latter group.

For Thoreau, a rejection of the majority-principle is the principal means by which to move toward a state of justice, which is to move toward a society in which the territorial state has been eliminated. As the text quoted above makes explicit, Thoreau desires to effectuate a revolution (because of the unjust nature of the status quo). And of utmost import, he imagines (the possibility of) a “peaceable revolution” being accomplished on the basis of individual persons acting in accord with the dictates of conscience against the state.⁷⁹

In “Slavery in Massachusetts” Thoreau reiterates his rejection of the authority and legitimacy of the American political regime, and again calls attention to the importance of the cultivation of moral sensitivity, that is, conscience. Thoreau maintains that persons ought to obey and serve God and develop into “men of probity.” Judges and lawyers leave much to be desired on Thoreau’s view because they refuse to exercise judgment and thus deny critical truths about their nature as divine beings and this denial undermines the possibility of realizing just social conditions. He bluntly denounces lawyers and judges, contending that they are owed little respect because “They consider, not whether the Fugitive Slave Law is right, but whether it is what they call *constitutional*.” Such persons, silencing the voice of conscience, “persist in being the servants of the worst of men, and not the servants of humanity.” Thoreau declares,

The question is not whether you or your grandfather, seventy years ago, did not enter into an agreement to serve the devil, and that service is not accordingly now due; but whether you will not now, for once and at last, serve God,—in spite of your own past recreancy, or that of your ancestor,—by obeying that eternal and only just constitution, which He, and not any Jefferson or Adams, has written in your being.⁸⁰

One might disagree with Thoreau’s understanding of God, the self, society, and conscience. But it should be apparent that Thoreau’s appeal to conscience was both rooted in a concern about injustice and aimed at inspiring social change. To neglect the fact that this is how conscience functions in Thoreau’s and contemporary social justice activism is to miss one of the more remarkable characteristics of sociopolitical life in recent centuries; from at least the early part of the nineteenth century, conscience has operated as and been understood as a voice of political dissent, calling into question (immoral) consensus and blind conformity.⁸¹ And political and religious radicals have been the modern bearers of conscience, with Thoreau standing out among these bearers.

Robert Richardson’s captivating biography of Ralph Waldo Emerson is memorably entitled, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*. This title captures what

Richardson regards as a central aspect of Emerson's strivings. Emerson lived a life of the mind. My concern here has been to bring to the surface the central elements of Henry David Thoreau's religious, ethical, and political strivings and to come to terms with the political implications of Thoreau's commitment to living a life of principle. The life of principle is the life of conscience. Thoreau's conscience was ablaze. This is evident throughout his writings. At every turn Thoreau confronts us with a challenge. He demands that we make explicit to whom or what we are allegiant. He asks us to announce our commitments. Thoreau asks, in so many words, Do you have conscience or not? Fitting for a revolutionary with a conscience on fire, Thoreau gave the world prophecy in prose form—prose composed to ignite.

Thoreau's call for persons to wake up is a call for regeneration that involves cultivating moral virtues that enable one to rely on one's own conscience and judgment. And the assumption is that the content of conscience is universal and, again, that acting on the basis of conscience will instigate social change. In John Thomas's words, Transcendentalists, including Thoreau, contend that,

Every man may safely trust his conscience, properly informed, because it is the repository for divine truth. When men learn to trust their consciences and act on them, they naturally encourage others to do the same with the certainty that they will reach the same conclusions. Individual conscience thus creates a social conscience and a collective will to right action. Concerted right action means moral revolution.⁸²

Thoreau's emphasis on exemplary moral action was rooted in his particular conception of moral reform and social change. He believed that political, religious, and social attitudes and actions are contagious. An individual act of defiance may appear nil in isolation, yet bold action inspires bold action. When communities of persons begin to confess the truth, and act in accord with it, others will begin to act in ways consistent with that truth as far as it is possible to do so.

In this way, Thoreau and Tolstoy are in agreement. Tolstoy wrote, in *The Kingdom of God Is Within*, "Only boldly profess the truth to which we are called, and we should find at once that hundreds, thousands, millions of men are in the same positions as we, that they see the truth as we do, and dread as we do to stand alone in recognizing it, and like us are only waiting for others to recognize it also."⁸³ Gandhi's attraction to Thoreau and Tolstoy had to do with this radical faith in the possibility of inspiring courageous action and swaying public opinion with nonviolent action—soul force.

Thoreau puts in sharp relief the connection among who we are, what we do, and the social circumstances in which we find ourselves (which is precisely the reason that Thoreau's life and thought has inspired so many radical

activists). As theorists of social change and revolution note, cooperation is presupposed in nearly every oppressive situation; noncooperation with oppressive authorities is a must. It is thus imperative for persons in oppressive situations to realize the dynamic relationship between cooperation and the oppressive states of affairs. Thoreau calls on persons to do what they know is right, to dispense with hypocrisy, double standards, blind conformity, and indifference. And he trusts that if persons are reflective, then they will understand what right action entails, and thus find cause to defy certain social practices.

We could say, then, that for Thoreau revolution must begin with a refusal to evade responsibility. In that way revolution begins with asking the ethical question. Will I obey authorities that command me to kill unjustly? Will I torture? Am I to hand over a fugitive slave? Each person must determine for him or herself whether or not to consider torture as wrong or not; whether she will or will not join the firing squad; serve as warden of a prison which jails people for having broken laws that are widely regarded as unjust.

Thoreau posits the necessity of a coincidence of refusals and turns to prophecy and warning because he understood well that an isolated act of disobedience could not itself accomplish the revolution. It initiates the revolution; it solicits fellow revolutionaries; but it does not accomplish it. But, "Revolutions are never sudden," as Thoreau notes.⁸⁴ They begin with self-examination and the revolutionary call that is connected to action from principle.⁸⁵ Thoreau's writings and action were attempts to incite and provoke awakenings. Recall his announcement in *Walden*: "I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up."⁸⁶ The prophet's call and action are replete with hope and faith. One who issues the call says: Awakening is possible. Thus, Thoreau, in appealing to conscience, hopes that his appeal awakens a public. An awakened plurality, refusing to support the territorial state, ushers in the death of the state. And because, for Thoreau, the modern territorial state is a false necessity engaged in unjust practices that oppress, degrade, and repress human persons, it is this death that would make social and political freedom possible—it would initiate the liberation of the slaves and an end to American imperialism.

In perhaps one of his most revealing comments, for our purposes, offering his take on the meaning of "America," Thoreau contends that by putting life in perspective and understanding what is truly necessary, a "true America" might emerge. The meaning of America has been contested territory from the beginning of European conquest and settlement of the New World. Economic and political crises, technological innovations, and natural disasters, when they occur, intensify contests over social and institutional norms and practices and thereby deepen debates over meaning. Such contests may proceed by words or swords, so to speak. The nineteenth century, the American state's first century, hosted a wave of crises and dramatic events

that challenged contemporaries' understandings of America or the ideal of America. From the war of 1812 to the Compromise of 1820, the emergence of Monroe Doctrine, the Nullification Crisis, the Fugitive Slave Act, the case of Dred Scott, and the Native American Removal Act, the meaning of America was contested and in flux.

America, say some, is economic freedom. America, say others, is religious freedom. America is Eden. America is Empire. Some posit America as the realization of utopia; they equate the status quo with the Ideal. But others insist that we avoid confusing our norms with extant material social arrangements. For these latter figures, what needs to be defended is not the status quo, but a vision, such that the vision might seize here and there a person or collectivity, orienting action in a way that might pave a way for its realization. America could and should be this or that, say these characters. Thoreau, of course, belongs to this latter group—the visionaries.

When Thoreau lays down his understanding of the meaning of America, as we might expect, it is an understanding intricately intertwined with his religious and political notions. Thoreau proclaims in *Walden*,

The only true America is that country where you are at liberty to pursue such a mode of life as may enable you to do without these [false necessities such as tea or coffee], and where the state does not endeavor to compel you to sustain slavery and war and other superfluous expenses which directly or indirectly results from the use of such things [as tea or coffee].⁸⁷

Thoreau posits America as a place where action based on principle has become the norm and an anarchist government has become a true possibility. Holding on to the vision hinges on adopting the appropriate posture vis-à-vis standing institutions. Disobedience keeps complacency at bay and militates against a tendency to mistake the status quo for the ideal. In consequence of his ideal conceptions of the self and government, Thoreau refuses to recognize the authority of the territorial state. Rather than comply with the territorial state—institutions of the dead—we ought to endeavor to “stay where God has put us, on his own conditions.” The territorial state should be dispensed with because its practices conflict with human nature and dignity—both of the oppressed and the oppressors—properly understood. Since doing away with the modern territorial state hinges on the awakening of persons, in his effort to wake his neighbors up, Thoreau sounds a political alarm: Persons who do wake up will realize that the territorial state is unnecessary and alter their methods of living, thus paving the way for and also constituting revolution—the realization of “the only true America.”

It is this conviction, I believe, that moved Thoreau to celebrate the life and death of the militant abolitionist John Brown. In “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” Thoreau praises John Brown because, unlike too many New

Englanders, “[Brown] did not set up even a political graven image between him and his God.”⁸⁸ Brown was thus unwilling to defer to the authority of any government. According to Thoreau, “No man in America has ever stood up so persistently and effectively for the dignity of human nature, knowing himself for a man, and the equal of any and all governments. In that sense he [John Brown] was the most American of us all.”⁸⁹ On my reading, Thoreau’s paean to John Brown connects directly to Thoreau’s enunciation of the form of government that would command his respect and his assertion about the means by which to realize that government (in his essay “Resistance to Civil Government”). To that end, we can say that according to Thoreau, the true America will be a place in which governments honor and respect the irreducible dignity of individual human persons. And it is true Americans who must bring into reality “the only true America.” For Thoreau, the true Americans will “acknowledge no master in human form,” which means of course that true Americans will regard no human persons as slaves. Moreover, they will realize that a preoccupation with electoral politics, constitutionalism, and obedience/conformity distracts us from cultivating the qualities of character that are critical to sustainable social change. They will understand, with John Brown, that “The fate of the country does not depend on how you vote at the polls—the worst man is as strong as the best at that game.” They will appreciate that more important than “what kind of paper you drop into the ballot-box once a year [is] what kind of man you drop from your chamber into the street every morning.”⁹⁰

The above religious and political vision is reiterated throughout Thoreau’s writings, including *A Week* and *Walden*. Although *A Week* and *Walden* are not always read in order to narrate Thoreau’s political philosophy, doing so here has been instructive. In particular, connecting his understanding of awakening and asceticism to the problems of false necessities and conformism has highlighted precisely what Thoreau finds problematic about the modern state and made clear that a Thoreauvian ethic leaves little space for the modern territorial state, given its assertions of authority and role in perpetuating unjust social conditions.

The fact that Thoreau emphasized self-reformation has led many to charge him with passivity in the face of injustice (Arendt) and to conclude that he did not advocate for the abolition of the modern state (David Miller). To avoid this kind of misunderstanding, I have directed attention to two fundamental yet often neglected facets of Thoreau’s ethics. First, I have stressed the fact that Thoreau believed that “a moral reform must take place first, then the necessity of [social reform] will be superseded, and we shall sail and plough by its force alone.”⁹¹ It is notable that Thoreau was sympathetic to communarians who established utopian communities, but he doubted the viability of their enterprises because they, particularly Fourierists, struck Thoreau as excessively materialist. Thoreau’s “A Paradise (to be) Regained,” published in the *Democratic Review* in the early 1840s offered an alternative

to Fourier's socialist doctrine and the transcendentalist communitarian vision of George Ripley and others. Communitarians and communists of the 1840s and 1850s were materialists, the most of extreme of whom were of the view that reformed material (social) conditions could lead to the transformation of human character and social relations generally. It is not as though Thoreau doubted the relationship between social arrangements and the character of individual persons. Few thoughtful human persons have ever doubted this. And while liberals are so often accused of neglecting the importance of "tradition," even liberals are cognizant of the significance of social order, which is why liberalism is so often associated with either a particular kind of economy or a specific type of governmental arrangement. What separates the materialists and idealists is the degree to which they emphasize the need for institutional change on the one hand and individual conversion or awakening on the other. In the end, Thoreau identifies neither with the idealists nor the materialists. Instead, he posits, perhaps paradoxically, consciousness as an effect of social process and the raising of consciousness as a precondition to reformed behavior. For Thoreau, self-reform is a precondition to or even tantamount to social reform. This connects to the second point that I have stressed. Thoreau insisted that it is desirable and possible to replace the modern institutions, including representational democracies, with higher forms.

When these aspects of Thoreau's ethics are brought into the frame, it is difficult to deny the revolutionary dimension of his thought. Given the aspects on display, I think that it is evident that Thoreau did in fact prescribe a recipe for destroying the territorial state: a conscience on fire is the recipe for the state's demise. In the light of all of this, if we accept that Thoreau is in fact an anarchist, as I have maintained, then we are on solid ground when claiming that Thoreau is classifiable as a *strong* anarchist.

V

In this chapter, I have analyzed Thoreau's thought and activism in terms of a view of anarchism that differs from common conceptions; I have described a familiar American icon in strange terms. The strangeness notwithstanding, to my mind, the most crucial question in our interpretive analysis of Thoreau's ethics is whether the term anarchism fits him better than most other terms. Descriptive case studies in the field of "religion, ethics, and politics," drawing on American pragmatism, seek to provide clarity about how religious-ethical principles congeal so as to motivate sociopolitical action or vice versa. This analytical enterprise entails attaching particular descriptive terms to the subjects and objects of study. Such analysis, to be successful, requires employing maximally clear concepts or descriptive terms and consistently applying these concepts or terms to the phenomena

in question. Social action that is interesting enough to warrant analysis ordinarily resists easy description or reduction to single terms, so that when we attach single (descriptive) nouns or adjectives to complicated subjects and objects, we are likely to miss something. I have undoubtedly missed some things in this chapter. Yet, on the whole, I am confident that I have accurately spelled out how anarchism is understood by most self-described anarchists and students of anarchism and I have consistently employed the concepts in question. Further, I have wholeheartedly striven to represent and explicate Henry David Thoreau's vision in a way that is faithful to the spirit of Thoreau's life/thought as I understand it.

In particular, I have invoked anarchism (an "ism") both in order (1) to direct attention to the substance of Thoreau's thought and the significance of his political disobedience and (2) to elucidate (if not explicitly then at least implicitly) the way in which other "isms" fail to adequately capture Thoreau's normative vision. Yet at the same time, paradoxically, in order to avoid letting any "ism" get in the way, I have tried to concentrate on the substance of Thoreau's commitments in relation to a noncontroversial description of the practices and aspects of territorial states, including representational democracy. Anarchism is certainly not a category or descriptive term without limitations, yet, again, the measure of its appropriateness is the degree to which it clarifies or captures Thoreau's commitments as well as or better than the alternatives. Accordingly, I have concluded that Thoreau can be plausibly described as an anarchist (only) after reflecting deeply on the meaning of anarchism in relation to other political philosophical and theoretical categories and meditating on the implications of Thoreau's religious-ethical vision.

Some, I suspect, might be reticent to classify Thoreau as an anarchist not because they disagree with how I have defined anarchism, but because they believe that Thoreau was somewhat ambivalent in his criticism of the modern state. This assertion about Thoreau's ambivalence is predicated on the claim that Thoreau presented direct or specific rather than general criticisms of the modern state. A person who embraces this view might contend that it is difficult or even impossible to say for certain whether anarchism is a term that fits, given the way in which Thoreau's criticisms of the American and Massachusetts states (seem to have) centered on slavery and the Mexican-American War. This way of thinking about Thoreau gives rise to a chain of counterfactual questions. What would have become of his thought had he lived through the end of America's Civil War or long enough to see the passage of the thirteenth and fourteenth amendments to the US Constitution? Would Thoreau's sharp criticisms of the state have become blunt with the passage of time and constitutional amendments? It is possible. Yet if I have clarified anything at all in this chapter, I hope that it is the degree to which Thoreau criticized the modern state on multiple related-yet-distinct bases. He undoubtedly disparaged

the American and Massachusetts governments for their respective roles in perpetuating a slave-based economy. But Thoreau also took umbrage with American imperialism and colonialism, including the treatment of "Native Americans."

In consequence, even if we accept the suggestion that the American Civil War actually ended with the abolition of slavery rather than simply with an alteration of its form, then there is still the fact(s) of American imperialism and colonialism. In fact, developments that occurred during the period between Thoreau's death toward the beginning of the American Civil War and Dorothy Day's birth in 1897 mostly substantiated Thoreau's contentions about the evils of the American territorial state. Immediately after the Civil War, a coterie of generals who had honed their martial skills in Oregon Territory and California during the Gold Rush and the Mexican-American War that followed on its heels, and went on to attain a place in the pantheon of American military as heroes of the Civil War, turned their attention and their rifles toward Cherokees, Creeks, and other Amerindians scattered throughout the American South and Southwest. During the Indian wars and with the Indian Appropriations Act of 1871, the "natives" were "resettled" on reservations, making way for destiny, Manifest Destiny. This all coincided with elaboration and entrenchment of the Monroe Doctrine and the birth of full-fledged American imperialism. It is impossible to say how Thoreau would have reacted to the changes that occurred in the years immediately following his death, yet based on the written record that he has left us, there is little reason to think that his view of the modern state would have been fundamentally altered, especially in the light of the expansion of American imperialism.

But even if we could imagine a world in which the American state did not employ its force in order to protect the interests of slaveholders or merchants, I am not convinced that a person with Thoreau's convictions would necessarily be inclined to reconcile with the modern state. To appreciate why this is so, we must understand that I have staked my anarchist interpretation of Thoreau's political philosophy on more than a claim about how the above injustices shaped his conception of the duties that we owe to the territorial state. I have stressed that Thoreau objected to the American and Massachusetts governments on the basis of their form. In particular, I indicated that Thoreau maintained that it was desirable and "possible to take a step further towards recognizing and organizing the rights of man." By this I take Thoreau to be making a case for consent-based political organizations. In short, Thoreau maintained that the ideal society would be one comprised of voluntary associations. He gave voice to this ideal throughout his speeches and writings. To that end, when taken together, I submit that Thoreau's speeches and writings present a religious-ethical and sociopolitical vision that is consistent with anarchism as it has come to be understood.

Thoreau's vision has inspired a long line of anarchists, including Tolstoy, Kropotkin, Emma Goldman, Henry Salt, Herbert Read, Paul Goodman, Howard Zinn, and Noam Chomsky. My analysis in this chapter has brought to the surface the aspects of Thoreau's theory and praxis that have proven important for such persons. Interestingly enough, the fact that this is so points to the fact that not all is lost for persons not persuaded by my interpretation of Thoreau as an anarchist. It seems to me as though one value of my approach to Thoreau is that I have basically performed an anarchist reading of Thoreau that many others gesture at yet do not carry out in an extensive or systematic fashion.⁹² In other words, on some levels I have read Thoreau's work in precisely the way that persons who find Thoreau's vision conducive with anarchism (must) read his work. Juxtaposing *A Week*, *Walden*, and essays such as "Resistance to Civil Government," has allowed me to illustrate the way in which religious-ethical and political theoretical themes intertwine and permeate Thoreau's thought. Finally, connecting Thoreau's political essays to some of his texts that are not always interpreted in political philosophical and theoretical terms has put me in a position to identify premises that might serve as ground on which to defend or construct an anarchist ethic.

Because Thoreau did not devote much energy to articulating a constructive vision of community, vehemently criticized "institutional religion," and based on his thoroughgoing emphasis on individual autonomy, many anarchists, social theorists, and political philosophers maintain that it is impossible to found a flourishing, diverse community based on Thoreauvian ideas. I am not sure that this is true. But rather than turn to Thoreau's ideas with an eye toward resolving this issue, having made explicit the themes and ideas extant in Thoreau's thought that have informed the formation of an emergent religiously motivated anarchist tradition, we will gain more by turning to Dorothy Day, a more conventionally religious person, who weaves together a constructive vision with elements—such as autonomy, asceticism, and revolutionary withdrawal—remarkably and perhaps surprisingly similar to those developed by Thoreau.