

Tracing Morality in the Thoreauvian and Gandhian Concept of Civil Disobedience

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Abstract

Henry David Thoreau and Mahatma Gandhi are two great personalities whose ideas on civil disobedience have a profound influence on political and social movements. Both of them shared some common facts. Both of them emphasised on resisting unjust and immoral laws, and regarded it moral duty to reject them. 'In an article titled 'For Passive Resistance', published in Indian Opinion, Gandhi gave an extract from Thoreau's famed essay on civil disobedience. It was prefaced with the quotation from Tolstoy, 'The principle of state necessity can bind only those men who disobey God's law, who for the sake of worldly advantage try to reconcile the irreconcilable; but a Christian who sincerely believes that the fulfilment of Jesus's teaching shall bring him salvation cannot attach any importance to this principle' (Bhattacharya, 1977, p. 60). It has often been claimed that Gandhi borrowed the idea of civil disobedience from Thoreau. However, Gandhi denied this in a letter addressed to P. Kodanda Rao of the Servants of India Society on September 10, 1935.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Received: 15/07/25
Approved: 20/08/25

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*RJPP Apr.25-Sept.25,
Vol. XXIII, No. II,
Article No. 21
Pg. 169-175*

Online available at:
[https://anubooks.com/
journal-volume/rjpp-sept-
2025-vol-xxiii-no2-261](https://anubooks.com/journal-volume/rjpp-sept-2025-vol-xxiii-no2-261)

[https://doi.org/10.31995/
rjpp.2025.v23i02.021](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpp.2025.v23i02.021)

“The statement that I had derived my idea of civil disobedience from the writings of Thoreau is wrong. The resistance to authority in South Africa was well advanced before I read Thoreau’s essay on civil disobedience. However the movement was then known as passive resistance. As it was incomplete, I coined the word Satyagraha for the Gujarati readers. When I saw the title of Thoreau’s great essay, I began to use his phrase to explain our struggle to the English readers. However I found that even civil disobedience failed to convey the full meaning of the struggle. I therefore adopted the phrase civil resistance” (Fischer, 1951, p. 104). Nevertheless, Thoreau’s ‘Civil Disobedience’ essay influenced Gandhi, and Gandhi himself affirmed this fact many times. While writing a letter to Henry Salt, Gandhi mentioned his encounter with Thoreau:

“Dear friend, I was agreeably surprised to receive your letter. Yes, indeed, your book, which was the first English book I came across on vegetarianism, was of immense help to me in steadying my faith in vegetarianism. My first introduction to Thoreau’s writings was, I think, in 1907 or later, when I was in the thick of the passive resistance struggle. A friend sent me Thoreau’s essay on civil disobedience. It left a deep impression on me. I translated a portion of that essay for the readers of Indian Opinion in South Africa, which I was then editing, and I made copious extracts from that essay for that paper. That essay seemed to be so convincing and truthful that I felt the need to know more about Thoreau, and I came across your life of him, his ‘Walden, and other short essays, all of which I need with great pleasure and equal profit (Iyer, 1991, p. 71).”

Henry David Thoreau campaigned for the abolition of slavery. He wrote his famous essay ‘Resistance to Civil Disobedience.’ He went to prison for the sake of his principles, and his essay is sanctified by his suffering (Bhattacharya, 1977, p. 60). Many years later, Gandhi wrote about him, “Thoreau furnished me through his essay on civil disobedience with scientific confirmation of what I was doing in South Africa” (60). The same thought kept on repeating in his mind, and in 1942, he wrote a letter to President Roosevelt, “I have profited greatly by the writings of Thoreau and Emerson” (60). Thoreau used the title ‘The Rights and Duties of the Individual in Relation to Civil Government’ when he delivered it as a lecture and published it with the title ‘Resistance to Civil Government’ (D. Hunt, 1989, p. 287). The title ‘civil disobedience appeared in a collection of essays entitled *A Yankee Canada (1866)*, four years after the death of Thoreau, from some anonymous editor at Ticknor and Fields, the Boston publishing firm (p. 287).

Thoreau connected morality and civil disobedience by arguing that it is the moral duty of the individual to resist immoral government actions. He believed that when government laws, acts and policies violate individual rights, personal ethics

and justice, then it should not be accepted silently and it becomes necessary to disobey them. Thoreau had firm faith in the individual conscience. He advocated that individual must act according to their own understanding of what is just. For Thoreau, civil disobedience was a moral imperative. He believed that morality should precede state laws.

Thoreau's ideas on civil disobedience were connected to his philosophy of nature. He argued that living in close contact with nature allows individuals to cultivate a deeper understanding of themselves and the world. Thus clarity of conscience, drawn from nature, helps in deciding and choosing right and wrong. Alfred I. Tauber pointed out that Thoreau realized, even as he jotted down what was indisputably a critical insight – the very fulcrum of his entire project that allowed the self to lift the world to capture experience in a moral, indeed spiritual frame. He pursued his work of observing and reporting the flora of the hillside (Tauber, p, 160). As with a well-cultivated garden, he admired the hill and contemplated that ‘‘ it would be pleasant to write the history of one hillside for one year’’ (160). Thoreau admired and enjoyed the vegetation's rich colors and fragrances and related nature to himself as an aesthetic experience. Tauber further narrated that Thoreau's attention to particulars was in service of two faculties, the aesthetic and the spiritual, each reflection of a self-conscious awareness so that he might know his place and his time (160).

Thoreau lived in isolation at Walden Pond for more than two years. By living there, he sought to minimize societal influence and tune into the deeper and natural truths of nature. Thoreau believed that the natural laws are more fundamental and divine. Thoreau stated, ‘‘ The universe is wider than our views of it’’ (Atkinson, P., 285). He also argued that human laws often conflict with the natural laws. Thoreau mentioned Walden and other writings of Henry David Thoreau that,

‘‘ Direct your eye right inward and you will find
A thousand regions in your mind
Yet undiscovered. Travel them, and be
Expert in home-cosmography’ (P, 286).

Nature always follows the evolutionary process of growth. Similarly civil disobedience is also a peaceful way of challenging unjust laws. Thoreau declared, as he did in the Walden that ethical life necessarily required living in the present moment. He observed about the centrality of living in the present, as he quoted, ‘‘Change is change. No new life occupies old bodies- they decay. It is born and grows, and flourishes. Men very pathetically inform the old, accept and wear it.

Why put up with the alms-house when you may go to heaven? It is embalming more” (Tauber, p, 24). He further made a statement that, ‘‘ My actual life is a fact in view of which I have no occasion to congratulate myself, but for my faith and aspiration I have respect. It is from these that I speak. Every man’s position is in fact too simple to be described. I have sworn no oath. I have no designs on society- or Nature- or God. I am simply what I am, or I begin to be that. I live in the present. I only remember the past- and anticipate the future’’ (24). His existential stance closely follows from this stance, ‘‘ ...When you travel to the celestial city, carry no letter of introduction. When you knock ask to see God- none of the servants. In what concerns you much do not think that you have companions-know that you are alone in the world’’ (24). Thoreau called upon the ancient Delphic oracle, ‘‘know thyself’’ from which his ethic must emanate, ‘‘ Pursue, keep up with, circle round and round your life as a dog does his master’s chaise. Do what you love. Know your own bone; gnaw at it, bury it, unearthen it, and gnaw it still. Do not be too moral. You may cheat yourself out of much of life so. Aim above morality. Be not simply good- be good for something. Fables indeed have their morals, but the innocent enjoys the story’’ (25). Thoreau believed that there is no past and no future. He further narrated, ‘‘ All that I could say, then, with respect to farming on a large scale- I have always cultivated a garden- was, that I had had my seeds ready. Many think that seeds improve with age. I have no doubt that time discriminates between the good and bad; and when at last I shall plant, I shall be less likely to be disappointed. But I would say to my fellows, once and for all, as long as possible live free and uncommitted. It makes but little difference whether you are committed to a farm or the county jail’’ (Thoreau, Walden, p, 75). According to Thoreau, Divine time is eternal.

Thoreau believed that the world is forever new. It is a world of evolutionary process and continuity. He believed that only through deliberate attention, expectation and appreciation nature’s fruits can be savoured (Tauber,p, 24). In Thoreau’s calculation time becomes moral. As he mentioned, ‘‘ In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and the future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line’’ (36). Indeed, one might even say that Walden is dedicated to alerting the reader of the ethical imperative to live fully in the present (36). He stressed, ‘‘ You will pardon some obscurities, for there are more secrets to my trade than in most men, and yet not voluntarily kept, but inseparable from its very nature. I would gladly tell all that I know about it, and never paint ‘‘ No admittance’’ on my gate’ (36). In Walden and Civil Disobedience, Thoreau regarded time as a central theme. He regarded the value of time as the most

precious thing in an individual's life. In Walden Thoreau wrote, "Time is but the stream I go a fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars (p, 52) He called on people to resist wasting time on trivial pursuits. One should live morally and authentically. By retreating to Walden Pond, he wanted to see if he could live without the distractions of society, giving his time to pursuits that would lead to personal growth and insights.

Thoreau was critical of the state's excess and of curbing individual freedom. He started his essay with the motto:

"That government is best that governs least," and I would like to see it acted upon more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which I also believe: "That government is best that governs not at all," and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government that they will have (Bari, p. 134). "Government is at best an expedient, but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient. The objections that have been brought against a standing army, which are many and weighty and deserve to prevail, may also at last be brought against a standing government. The standing army is only an arm of the standing government. The government itself, which is only the mode in which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it. Witness the present Mexican War, the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for, at the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure" (Bari, p. 134). Gandhi asserted that true democracy lies not in the number of persons who vote and govern, but in the extent to which the masses assimilate the spirit of nonviolence and social service (Singh, 1994, p. 155). Gandhi further observed, "A nation that runs its affairs smoothly and effectively without much state interference is truly democratic. Where such a condition is absent, the form of government is democratic in name" (p. 156). Gandhi was aware of Thoreau's writing during the formative period of the first Satyagraha movement. "During ten years, he wrote, "that is, until 1914, there was hardly an issue of Indian Opinion without an article from me" (Hendrick, 1970, p. 179). Gandhi recognized what Thoreau had said:

"After all, the practical reason why, when power is once in the hands of the people, a majority is permitted, and for a long period, continues to rule, is not because they are most likely to be in the right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority, but because they are physically the strongest. But a government in which the majority

rules in all cases cannot be based on justice, even as far as men understand it. Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience? - In which cases do majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable? Must the citizen ever, for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislation? Why does every man have a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first and subjects afterward. The only obligation that I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think is right (Thoreau, p. 5).”

Gandhi said that it was immoral to be obedient to of unjust laws. Speaking about the American government, Gandhi quoted Thoreau: “If one were to tell me that this was a bad government because it taxed certain foreign commodities brought to its ports, it is most probable that I should not make an ado about it, for I can do without them. All machines have friction, and possibly this is enough to counterbalance the evil. At any rate, it is a great evil to make a stir about it. But 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” (Thoreau, p. 8). Gandhi further explained that in the Asiatic Registration Act, British Indians have not only a law that has some evil in it, that is to say, using Thoreau’s words, a machine with friction in it, but it is evil legalized, or it represents friction with machinery provided for it. Resistance to such an evil is a divine duty (Hendrick, 1970, p. 179).

For Gandhi civil resistance was a wider and more comprehensive term than civil disobedience. Civil resistance was a part of satyagraha. Gandhi elaborated, Civil disobedience is a branch of satyagraha, but all satyagraha is not civil disobedience” (Bari, 1971, p. 145). In Gandhi’s opinion, civil disobedience excluded non-cooperation of the fiercest type. Gandhi stated, “ Non-cooperation in itself is more harmful than civil disobedience, but in its effect it is far more dangerous for the government than civil disobedience (p. 161)’, but he also believed that civil disobedience was a necessary part of non-cooperation. As Gandhi further explained, “It is only when a person has...obeyed the laws of society scrupulously that he is in a position to judge as to which particular rules are good and just and which are unjust and iniquitous. Only then does the right accrue to him of the civil disobedience of certain laws in well-defined circumstances” (p. 162). Similar to Gandhi, Thoreau’s justification is, “It costs me less in every sense to incur the penalty of disobedience to the state than it would be to obey” (p. 162).

According to Gandhi, civil disobedience was a peaceful process. As he quoted **w**e have too long been mentally disobedient to the laws of the state and have too often surreptitiously evaded them, to be fit all of a sudden for civil disobedience.

Disobedience to be civil has to be open and non-violent. ‘Complete civil disobedience is regarded as the state of peaceful rebellion.’ To quote him further, “ a refusal to obey every single state-made law. It is certainly more dangerous than an armed rebellion. For it can never be put down if the civil resisters are prepared to face extreme hardships. It is based upon an implicit belief in the absolute efficiency of innocent suffering. By noiselessly going to prison a civil resister endures a calm atmosphere” (Gandhi, 1951, p.172).

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