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Thoreau's Political Asceticism: from Abolitionism to Environmental Justice

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**THOREAU'S POLITICAL ASCETICISM:
FROM ABOLITIONISM TO ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE**

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**A DISSERTATION
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The reason why an ingenious soul shuns society, is to the end of finding society. It repudiates the false, out of love for the true.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Literary Ethics"

Abstract

This dissertation offers a new interpretation of *Walden*. Against caricatures of Thoreau as asocial, apolitical, and areligious, the dissertation argues that Thoreau's vision of good society, his intentions with respect to politics, and his understanding of religion are all central to understanding *Walden* rightly. With respect to society, Thoreau did not merely depart society for the woods when he undertook the experiment at Walden; he also joined a new society, one that included beings and persons often overlooked by contemporary understandings of social life. With respect to politics, Thoreau sometimes dismissed politics as useless; but he also enacted a form of life that was a direct response to some of the most pressing political problems of his period. With respect to religion, Thoreau did leave the Unitarian church in which he was raised; but he did this for explicitly theological reasons and by drawing upon traditional religious sources, many of them focused on ascetic practice. All together, I call this understanding of Thoreau's effort at Walden "political asceticism" – a phrase that aims to acknowledge the contradictions Thoreau so loved, while also suggesting that viewing Thoreau either as a contemplative (with its positive valence) or a quietist (with its negative one) only tells half the story. The Thoreau I uncover viewed his retreat itself as an investment in just living, and thus a means of political resistance to injustice.

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Anat Benzvi became my writing partner before I realized it, helped me through the whole of this project, and continues to remind me that whatever it takes to keep writing is what you have to do. "If in order to write you need...a certain light yellow paper, a certain special pen, a dim light shining from the left, it is useless to tell yourself that just any pen will do, that any paper and any light will suffice."¹

Family of all kinds have given their time and good will to support a life that I think sometimes looks strange from the outside. The Newheisers's hospitality has given respite from the work. My own parents and family, without whom I could not have done this or anything else, encouraged me to read when I was a child. They left me time and space to climb trees and keep

¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 10.

notebooks. They taught me that none of us is free until all of us are, and they showed me how to gather your people around you and love them like crazy.

My father was good at staying put. He died at home with my mother in a house on the Gulf of Mexico that his parents and grandparents had inhabited before him. That was the same summer I moved to New Jersey and began the PhD. This dissertation was completed halfway around the world from New Jersey, in a house near the Merri Creek and Joe's Garden – cultivated for the last 100 years, mostly by immigrants – in Melbourne, Australia. From the window where I wrote, I could see the weather and the children come and go. For taking me there – and for everything else – my thanks to David Newheiser.

Preface

I care about people and their flourishing. I care about the places we live and the other things that live in those places, and about the relationship between us and the places we live. I care about growing things and making things. I care about walking, and trees. I want to follow Jesus and I think that the Gospel teaches a preferential option for the poor, which just means that the poor have a special relationship to God, and that all people, but especially those with privileges, should prioritize the wellbeing of the poor. I care about communities, and about building communities in which people are supported, loved, and provided the freedom to live as they like. I care about building a future for humans in which our greatest goods are valued: our love for one another, our capacity for learning, our difference from one another.

And I also care about books. One of the books that I love is Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*.

I like it because it is funny, and beautiful, and weird. It is hard. I like it because it is about people and the places they live and the relationships they have to other people. I like that it doesn't hide how cranky it is. I like that it shows me something about how much is possible outside of what I expect. I like that it doesn't seem to hide its weird messy bits, its contradictions and vices.

One of the places in the world that I love most of all is a region on the Gulf of Mexico, on the panhandle of Florida, where I grew up, where my mother now lives and where my father farmed clams. It is an extraordinary place, one of the biodiversity hotspots of North America, full of forests, river, marshes, and estuaries that host teeming ecosystems. It attracts people who care about and enjoy such things, and it is beautiful. It also has a fascinating history. Because of its

important geographical position, the British built a fort on the Apalachicola River in the last year of the war of 1812, in what was then Spanish Florida. They made alliances there with native people who lived in the region or had fled there from Alabama – especially Red Stick Creek and Seminole – and assembled a force of free black people including some free citizens of Spanish Florida (where there was not slavery) and some formerly enslaved people who had fled to Spanish Florida from slavery in the United States. The British distributed arms and ammunitions among their allies in the region, and when they withdrew in 1815, after learning of the end of the War of 1812, they left the fort under the control of one of the formerly enslaved men who had been a sergeant major under the British. Most of the native people returned to the places that they had lived before, but the black British allies remained at the fort, cleared land along the river for farming, and established a growing community.² An observer wrote, in the summer of 1815: “They Keep Sentry & the Negroes are Saucy & insolent, and say they are all Free.”³

This community of free black people, stretching for miles along the river, and only about sixty miles down the river from the Georgia border and called "Negro Fort," was seen as a threat to the United States. Slave owners complained that it served as a beacon for runaway slaves. So one year after the British withdrawal, in July of 1816 when the inhabitations and gardens of the settlement stretched for fifty miles along the river, the US military surrounded the fort both on land and on the river and demanded the surrender of the 300-400 people who were sheltered inside. They refused to surrender, raised the English Jack, and defended the fort for days. Eventually, a shot from US gunboats on the river hit the gunpowder magazine and caused a

² The first book-length work on this community is Nathaniel Millett, *The Maroons of Prospect Bluff and Their Quest for Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013). See also, Matthew J. Clavin, *Aiming for Pensacola: Fugitive Slaves on the Atlantic and Southern Frontiers* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), 39–61.

³ Quoted in Clavin, *Aiming for Pensacola*, 52.

massive explosion. That explosion killed many of the people inside the fort. The site of the fort and that deadly explosion is now located within what is seen as pristine state forest, the historic markers (which use the current name "Fort Gadsden") are rarely visited, and the story of the free black people who grew gardens and fought to maintain their home is largely forgotten by the tourists who come to paddle the river. Kayaking is big.

When I began the PhD, I thought my dissertation would treat that place, whose ecology and history I loved. I planned an ethnographic project about the way people think about environmental ethics on a local level there. I went to work learning about ethnographic methods, and I spent time in Apalachicola doing field work: attending local government meetings, learning about environmental activism, going out on the water with fishermen, and getting to know scientists who study the bay on which the town is located. That topic seemed to me rich and deep and ethically complicated. It also seemed that to do it well I would need to work on it for a long time. It occurred to me that a dissertation should be a project you can finish, not one that you can imagine working on for the rest of your life.

So I switched courses, and decided to write a dissertation on a book rather than a community. Because I think Thoreau is endlessly compelling, this didn't feel like a loss, exactly, more like something I needed to do first. Needed to do now. A way of getting to know myself, and practice for everything else. But there have been days when it was hard to see how the work I was doing on these nineteenth-century Yankee texts was related to the place I started out caring about.

Then, one day deep in the middle of this project something amazing happened. It doesn't happen often, at least not to me, but I guess every now and then when we're lucky the fates can send us a sign that we're in the place we're supposed to be, doing what we're supposed to be doing. That day I was reading in Thoreau's *Journal* from the summer of 1845, the summer he

went to live at Walden. And it was as if the parts of my life that sometimes seemed remote from one another were coming together in a way I could not yet explain. Just beginning to settle in to his life at the pond, Thoreau wrote,

And earlier today came 5 Lestrighones— Railroad men who take care of the road, some of them at least. They still represent the bodies of men-transmitting arms and legs-and bowels downward from those remote days to more remote. They have some got a rude wisdom withal—thanks to their dear experience. And one with them a handsome younger man — a sailor Greek like man — says "Sir I like your notions— I think I shall live so myself Only I should like a wilder country—where there is more game. I have been among the Indians near Apalachicola I have lived with them, I like your kind of life— Good-day I wish you success and happiness."⁴

Thoreau recorded his encounter with the railroad men at work in Walden Woods in his usual, playful way, likening them to ancient Greek "Lestrighones" who had appeared in Homer's *Odyssey*, and praising the wisdom they had gained by experience. Then he quoted one of them, one who seems to have been a kindred spirit: "Sir I like your notions." It is fun to imagine what Thoreau said his notions were to elicit this response. Did he say, "I have come to the woods to live deliberately"? Did he say, "I want to see how little I can live on"? Did he say, "I love the wild, and I want to live among it"? But then, and this was what took me aback, the railroad man had been to Apalachicola! He had lived with the Indians there, in a "wilder country." He thought it would be an even better place to live than Walden Woods, and he told Thoreau so. I grew up with legends of old Indian tracks through the woods, grew up looking for arrowheads on the beach, grew up trekking out to see middens made of the shells of oysters and clams, just some of

⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Journal, Volume 2: 1842-1848*, ed. Robert Sattelmeyer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 160–61.

the "game" the native people lived on, remnants of the native societies who loved the place before us. And here, in Thoreau's Journal, was a railroad man who had lived with them.

Because of Apalachicola's role as a port, it is not so surprising that railroad men in Concord would have been there. But to find that Thoreau wrote about the fact that they had startled me. I jumped up, shouting. It gave me comfort, somehow, in the middle of a project I sometimes struggled to believe in to find the panhandle I loved, in its earlier wilder shape, on those pages.

I think it made me feel that somehow, in some way I do not yet know, my life does hang together in all its half-formed pieces. The work I do is sometimes so interdisciplinary I have the feeling it will all fall apart, that the center cannot hold. This is a temptation. When I have it, I remember that Annie Dillard wrote:

You take it on faith that the multiform and variously lighted latitudes and longitudes were part of one world, that you didn't drop chopped from house to house, coast to coast, life to life, but in some once comprehensible way moved there, a city block at a time, a highway mile at a time, a degree of latitude and longitude at a time...⁵

When I am sitting elsewhere, writing, in Chicago or New Jersey or, now, Australia, and I remember how far from home, from the "wilder country" that I love I am, I try to remember Dillard's faith. You take it on faith, she says, that the parts belong – somehow – together, in one world. And at the same time, I think, you have to remember that no matter how many parts there seem to be, there is only one you holding them together. You have to know who that is to tell us the story of your moving elsewhere "a city block at a time, a highway mile at a time, a degree of latitude and longitude at a time."

⁵ Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 249.

I want to write toward a wide, beautiful, complicated, suffering world. This work deals with issues related to race, religion, class, and environment. Writing about these things, I have discovered some complicated linguistic issues about how I identify myself with respect to that world, those races, religions, classes, places, beauty, and suffering. When I describe white people, or black people, or poor people, or rich people, or native people, or people who live in places that suffer, or the pious ones, do I say "they"? "We"? I am only me. Thoreau wrote at the beginning of *Walden*, "I, on my own side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life" (I, 2).⁶ I try to remember that my own life shapes what I see to a large extent, especially when I write about people who are different from me, whose experience I only know distantly. I know I must often get it wrong. Myles Horton wrote, about "Knowing Yourself,"

You have to be careful not to think that you're somebody else. I've had to avoid thinking that I'm Nicaraguan or, when I was in India, Indian. I have a tendency to want to identify with people. I have to say to myself, 'Look, Horton, get as close to people as you can, have as much interest as you can, but don't get things mixed up. You're white, and black people can't say they are color-blind. Whites and white-controlled institutions always remind them that they're black, so you've got to recognize color.' That doesn't mean that you feel superior, it's just that you've got to realize that you can never fully walk in other people's shoes. You can only be a summer soldier, and when the excitement is over, you

⁶ I give references to *Walden* and "Civil Disobedience" in the tradition of Stanley Cavell: "To make my references to *Walden* independent of any particular edition, I shall give citations by chapter and paragraph, roman numerals for the former, arabic for the latter. References to 'Civil Disobedience' are also according to paragraph, preceded by 'CD.'" Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), 4. All references to Thoreau's other writings in this work are given in footnotes to particular editions.

can go back home. That doesn't mean that you don't have solidarity with black people and aren't accepted; it just means that you have a different role to play.⁷

I'm a woman who grew up with all kinds of privileges, and whose early privileges have only accumulated since. Some of those privileges I am so grateful for; others have made me a smaller, more anxious, less feeling and caring person. In this work I aim to write about the issues I have come to care about, but being careful not to think that I'm somebody else. In this spirit, I identify myself as white in the text that follows, not to feel superior or inferior, but in an effort – an effort still incomplete, I think – to be clear about who I am and the role I mean to play.

⁷ Myles Horton and Judith and Herbert Kohl, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography*, 1 edition (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 195.

Introduction

the dissertation's aims

Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, published in 1854, is still so regularly taught in US high schools that USAmericans usually know it by instinct. Whether or not they actually read *Walden*, they understand its basic plot: Thoreau went to the woods near Concord Massachusetts "to live deliberately," as he famously wrote. He built a tiny house by the shores of Walden Pond, in a friend's forest. He grew beans and read books and went on walks. He laid on his belly to peer through the ice of the pond when it was frozen over during the winter. And he recorded his experiences in journals that he developed over nearly ten years into *Walden*. This has made Thoreau into a saint of the environmental movement, sometimes.⁸ But, as we will see, he is complicated figure to hold up as a hero, perhaps especially for environmentalism.

Bring to mind two different figures of Thoreau. On the one hand, there is the Thoreau we have from *Walden*, the one whose nature piety inspired him to live in the woods, to spend time among the birds and the trees and the woodchucks. This is the Thoreau whose writings grew more and more focused on the observation of nature as he aged, who came to believe that the observation of the world around him was his most important activity. This Thoreau was a great naturalist. Then, on the other hand, there is the figure of Thoreau we have from the essay that has come to be called "Civil Disobedience," the Thoreau whose night in jail for not paying taxes inspired Gandhi – and then Martin Luther King, Jr. – to nonviolence in the pursuit of social justice. This Thoreau admired John Brown, even made him into a Christ figure, and derided

⁸ Of course, environmentalists are not agreed Thoreau should have this status. See William Chaloupka, "Thoreau's Apolitical Legacy for American Environmentalism," in *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Jack Turner (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009).

abolitionists for their attention to the problems of the South while they ignored the harms of industrialization of the Northern economy and the coincident neglect of the Northern poor.

I want to tell a story that can unite these two figures of Thoreau – his nature piety and his political commitment to justice – into one man, one life. Thoreau didn't just happen to love nature and also be committed to economic justice, as though those were separate interests. Those two features of his work were part of one thing: a form of piety that entailed pursuing spiritual flourishing for all. *Walden* is the book in which these two figures come together most vividly, so I make this argument by way of an interpretation of *Walden*, one that draws out the economic justice concerns that were driving much of it and that are often, surprisingly, neglected. I reinterpret the nature piety in *Walden* as the ground for Thoreau's radical political commitments. This unified figure offers an image in which environmentalism and efforts for just political community do not just happen to coincide but belong to one another, are integral, require one another.⁹

I think there are reasons we don't usually tell the story of *Walden* this way. The main one is that readers of Thoreau have generally been more invested in one of the two figures I described or the other – because they lived in a context in which one or the other of these radical visions was most pressing. For Gandhi, in colonial India, Thoreau's resistance to civil government offered an example of what resistance to political injustice could look like. But for Rachel

⁹ In this I hope to persuade those who share the growing agreement on this point among many with environmental concern that Thoreau is an ally rather than a foe. The articulation of this point as "integral ecology" was one of the reasons Pope Francis's recent encyclical was welcomed warmly by environmentalists: Francis, *Laudato Si'* [Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home], accessed October 16, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html. See also Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015).

Carson, facing the evidence of the harms of DDT in the United States, Thoreau's nature piety was most compelling. In both cases readers of Thoreau faced real, pressing problems that shaped their reception of his writing. Of course, it is not the case that Carson ignored the claims of economic and racial justice, or that Gandhi was unconcerned with the health of the land. But different communal contexts (often shaped in the US by ongoing effects of white supremacy, especially intense segregation) led to one emphasis or another in the way readers have told the story of who Thoreau is.

Since environmental justice movements of the 1980s and 1990s, the presumed whiteness of environmentalism is thankfully passing away, though of course its actual whiteness in the large national organizations, like whiteness of all kinds, persists. For too long, and still, white racial cultures of environmentalism have had tense relationships to communities of color, have failed to describe and fight environmental racism that harms such communities. The US history of land access (that it was stolen from native people) and labor (that it was so often stolen from Africans kidnapped and enslaved in the US) has meant that whites have had particularly privileged relationships to the places we lived and recreated and sought to preserve. White supremacy has made it so that white citizens often have greater social, economic, and political powers to protect the places we love than communities of color; white environmentalism too often kept our places clean, and sent our environmental harms to be endured by communities of color. But the movements for environmental justice that began in the 80s and 90s and have only grown in the years since are teaching white environmentalists that our privileges were never *ours*. The care and connection we experience to the places that we live is real, but as Thoreau believed, ownership can fool us. When we think we own the land alone, we can forget the alternative view: that it was given to all in common. Thoreau complained of those landowners who put up

fences – they interrupted his walking routes. But the insight was deeper: proprietary relationships can disfigure the ones who think of themselves as owners.¹⁰

Much of the aim of telling the story the way I do is a desire to inspire those communities of white environmentalists I often find myself among to cease our own segregation of Thoreau. To let him be the whole person that he was. To see his radical commitment to justice as the natural outgrowth of the nature piety for which we have admired him. And to let him teach us to be the more wholesome people we might become, persons who can acknowledge our interdependence and work for the benefit of the goods we can only share in common if we want to avoid the moral and spiritual corruption that comes with false forms of ownership.

I see a problem with the way I have set this up, however. This story could be read as one that tries to make Thoreau into a predecessor of environmental justice movements, those twentieth-century political movements that showed the ways in which environmental harm is so unevenly distributed to communities of color and the poor. I like that about the story I am telling, in that it tries to make Thoreau an ally of communities of color that are fighting for their wellbeing. But I am also attentive to the fact that Thoreau was no saint with respect to racial politics from the perspective of our times. And, more to the point, he was not the one who did the organizing – the work – required to bring environmental justice and movements against environmental racism into being and into the public view. The people who did that were citizens, patriots, who deserve our admiration and support. So part of me worries that this story will read as an aggrandizement of an imperfect man, at the expense of the vast coalitions of democrats who actually do the consistent, grinding work required to make environmental justice a reality.

¹⁰ I discuss this further in chapter 4.

When you're a person who likes Thoreau, as I do, writing about him carries with it one great danger: that the infatuation will blind you, that your admiration will lead you to make larger claims than you really have evidence for, and especially that you will take him to be exemplary, a moral model on a grand scale, when he also of course represents his time and its foibles. I feel the danger pressing in. I am inspired by the life Thoreau lived, especially by the ways in which he articulated the concerns that we share. He resisted the vision of the human promoted by industrial economy, and I find this feature of his writing deeply heartening. He was funny, and he struggled to find his way, and he loved and was loved deeply. In this way, I am drawn to how he articulated his humanity, and by doing that, enables the rest of us to be a little more human.

But I also know that my attachment to him sometimes leans in the direction of adulation. And I know that a lot of the Thoreau literature leans this way. Such a tendency is distasteful. He was not a perfect man.

In this context, my attempt to cast Thoreau as a proto-environmental justice figure could be read as undermining the importance of the citizens who created environmental justice movements in the first place. I do not attribute the development of those movements to Thoreau. What I mean to do is offer an interpretation of *Walden* that will unify the two strands I described before, the nature piety and the social justice, to show those who have been inspired by his nature piety that their piety entails a social justice politics, and those who have been inspired by Thoreau's vision of individualist politics that such a politics rests on a relation to nature that ought to be characterized by piety.

The dissertation is thus a new reading of *Walden*. My sense is that people do not usually read *Walden* this way because of segregation. It is telling that Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. –

leaders of movements against forces of white supremacy – are the most famous figures to put Thoreau to use for social justice causes. They read him with the struggles of their own communities in mind. For such communities, in contrast to many white communities, nature was not always a place of peace, and a naïve view of Thoreau's romanticism was perhaps less tempting. And it is telling that the predominantly white environmentalist movement focused so closely on the nature piety of *Walden*. Those readers came from communities in which forced land labor was past, coerced labor largely hidden, and the wildness of the woods indicated peace.¹¹

For Thoreau, the woods were not only a place of peace. They were also where people of color and those we now consider white (largely Irish) lived and worked. In going to the woods, he opened himself to encounter with people outside his social, racial, and class position. During his time in Walden Woods, Thoreau made his world a little less segregated. He went to live in a neighborhood that had been the home of formerly enslaved people and others outside of more elite Concord society. It was then the working place of some Irish laborers. He traveled with and befriended a native guide. He got to know the poor people who also lived in the woods. In everyday ways, he tried to get to know what life was like for others.

Eventually, he returned to what he called – with pointed irony – "civilized life." He took up residence in the family home he and his sister inherited from their parents. In this way, he was the recipient of inherited wealth that has made much of the history of philosophy possible.

Transcendentalism, like the first generation theorists of American democracy, and for that matter

¹¹ There is an important strand of literary interpretation that has argued that the view of wilderness and nature as a homeland and place of peace is inflected by white experience and fails to account for experiences of other groups. For examples see Melvin Dixon, *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Paul Outka, *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

like all intellectual life basically since Aristotle, famously relied on inherited wealth. As Bruce Kluklick has written, "Cambridge and Boston became the home to America's first 'intellectuals' and, assisted by inherited wealth, an associated genteel literary society."¹² Kluklick's aside hides a major tension at the heart of intellectual life in an allegedly democratic world. The tension is between the necessarily elite life of the universities and the perpetual movement for democratic equality that has unfolded over the last 300 years.

asceticism

A major feature of my interpretation of *Walden* is that it represents Thoreau as an ascetic. Asceticism is a form of religious practice in which the practitioner usually gives something up. In one of its characteristic forms, in the lives of Christian monks and nuns, this renunciation is given shape by three vows: of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The vow of poverty entails a renunciation of material wealth. The vow of chastity entails a renunciation most obviously of sexual pleasure, but also of the often associated bonds of family. The vow of obedience entails a renunciation of individual autonomy. Even Christians who do not take such vows can practice asceticism – by fasting, for instance, or practicing silent prayer. Different forms of such practices are prevalent across different religious traditions.

Those who do not practice such asceticism tend to think of it as rather foreign these days. Why would you deny yourself the goods of the world, when they are there for the taking?¹³ Perhaps especially in the modern period, and even more certainly in the late twentieth century,

¹² Bruce Kluklick, *A History of Philosophy in America, 1720-2000* (New York: Clarendon Press, 2002), 77.

¹³ Interesting answers to this question to be found in Ross Posnock, *Renunciation: Acts of Abandonment by Writers, Philosophers, and Artists* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016).

such religious renunciation has been seen with deep suspicion, and the associated religious traditions have witnessed major decline.

The worries about asceticism are diverse. One is that asceticism is bad for the person who practices it, that the self-denial entailed is unhealthy or damaging in some way. Perhaps, for example, fasting is a religious good, but it expresses a denial of the body that is subjugating.

Another worry, though, is that asceticism is bad for the world. According to this view, all ascetic practice does is offer the practitioner reassurance that she is good, without actually doing any good. After all, how on earth would *my* self-denial do *you*, or the community I am a part of, any good? Perhaps those things aren't associated with one another. And to the extent that I convince myself my ascetic practice is good, I excuse myself from the actually good work I could do for my community, and in this way asceticism is a form of quietism. Under this view, asceticism acknowledges that there are problems that need to be addressed, it aims to address them, but it is so ineffective that its ultimate result is support of the status quo. By refusing to engage with the world, ascetics give the world up to the suffering it currently holds.

My view is that asceticism can be both of these things, and neither, depending on the practice and the context. In Thoreau, I think, we have an example of a *political* ascetic, that is, one who was motivated to his renunciations by the instinct that our everyday choices make up our politics. On his rendering of asceticism, it entails renunciation. The first, most obvious one is moving away from town, to a small house. But his asceticism is not primarily about renunciation. This dissertation aims to show what else it is about. And it opens new perspectives on ascetic practice as a whole.

In fact, much religious asceticism is – like his – about more than what its practitioners reject. It is also about the positive practices they pursue (such as, typically, labor and prayer). And it is

more about what they gain through these practices than it is about the renunciations such practices require, real as they are. Further, the gains of the individual practitioners should not be the end of our understanding of what asceticism is for and does. Attention to the context out of which ascetic practice is born often uncovers that the practices are not only formative for the practitioner, but also for the society from which the practitioner withdraws. It is in this sense that I speak of political asceticism as a form of religious practice that intervenes in political discourse and action of its world.

on emerson and asceticism

Thoreau's interest in ascetic practice may have been inspired by Emerson – as so much was in the period in which he wrote *Walden*. But where Emerson alluded to ascetic life as a symbol, Thoreau literalized the symbol in his experiment at Walden.

Let me explain one instance in which Emerson alluded positively to asceticism, one that suggests he had the image of the monastery on his mind in the period in which Thoreau first met and befriended him. Emerson delivered an oration before the Literary Societies of Dartmouth College on July 24, 1838, a mere nine days after delivering the famous "Divinity School Address." It was entitled "Literary Ethics," and in it, he described the "resources, the subject and the discipline of the scholar."¹⁴ Especially the section on "discipline" offered a gentle but urgent call for those gathered to take up a more rigorous form of scholarly life.

In the "Divinity School Address," Emerson had addressed graduating divinity students who wanted to respond to "the evils of the church that now is." He had suggested that what was required of them was to breathe the breath of new life through the forms already existing. "Let

¹⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays & Poems*, ed. Joel Porte, Harold Bloom, and Paul Kane (New York: Library of America, 1996), 96.

the breath of new life be breathed by you through the forms already existing."¹⁵ In "Literary Ethics," Emerson said that in order to create an American intellectual culture, the scholar would need to adopt a "rule of his ambition and life." The language of a 'rule' related Emerson's understanding of the scholarly life to traditions of Christian monasticism, in which monastic communities were governed by a rule, usually written by their founder. The rule organized everything about communal life – when to pray, when to work, when to be alone, when to gather together, how to settle conflicts. Emerson's use of 'rule' alluded to these monastic communities, and introduced a series of paragraphs in which intellectual life was implicitly likened to monastic life. Those paragraphs took an old form and tried to breathe new life into it.

In those paragraphs, Emerson again evoked life in the monastery by his appeal to the benefits of solitude, which he described in glowing terms. "But go cherish your soul; expel companions; set your habits to a life of solitude; then will the faculties rise fair and full within, like forest trees and field flowers; you will have results, which, when you meet your fellow-men, you can communicate, and they will gladly receive."¹⁶ Solitude, as that in the monastery, was not utterly desolate. It could even be achieved around other people. "Think alone, and all places are friendly and sacred. The poets who have lived in cities have been hermits still." The solitude of the 'hermit' (another invocation of ancient forms of asceticism) was for thinking. It was not for itself. Emerson wanted to make this clear. He said, "Of course, I would not have any superstition about solitude. Let the youth study the uses of solitude and society. Let him use both, not serve either." Indeed, solitude had society as its end. "The reason why an ingenious soul shuns society, is to the end of finding society. It repudiates the false, out of love for the true." In this sense, Emerson echoed the ancient Christian sense in which the monk's retreat to the desert hermitage was not

¹⁵ Ibid., 91.

¹⁶ Ibid., 105.

primarily a rejection of society, though there was a sense in which it required that. The eremitic life was undertaken in an effort to grow closer to God – it repudiated the false, not for the sake of that repudiation, but because love for the true required it.

The desert monks left the cities of Egypt to pray in the desert. Emerson said that "You can very soon learn all that society can teach you for one while. Its foolish routine, and indefinite multiplication of balls, concerts, rides, theatres, can teach you no more than a few can." It was not that balls, concerts, rides, and theatres were worthless. The point was that to learn from them you need not indefinitely multiply your attendance at them. Instead, Emerson said, you have another option. "Then accept the hint of shame, of spiritual emptiness and waste, which true nature gives you, and retire, and hide; lock the door; shut the shutters; then welcome the imprisoning rain, – dear hermitage of nature."¹⁷ In this image, the scholar need not retire to the desert to find a hermitage, but can welcome the weather, in this case "the imprisoning rain," as his hermitage.

And then he said, continuing the extended allusion to monastic life and finally making it explicit, "You will pardon me, Gentlemen, if I say, I think that we have need of a more rigorous scholastic rule; such an asceticism, I mean, as only the hardihood and devotion of the scholar himself can enforce."¹⁸ In this sentence, his allusion to monastic life came out full force.

"Scholastic" has at least two significances. First, it referred to the scholar to whom he spoke and his scholastic life of study. But second, it referred to the traditions of Christian learning that flourished in medieval monastic communities, which were the homes of the first libraries and universities in Europe. This asceticism was thus partaking in what had been the practices of medieval Christians. It would breathe the breath of new life into the forms already existing.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 106.

But, of course, Christian asceticism had its own roots in the ancient philosophies with which it was in conversation as it developed. Emerson also alluded to those ascetics, when he wrote, "Let us sit with our hands on our mouths, a long, austere, Pythagorean lustrum." The 'lustrum' referred to a ritual from the Roman republic, in which the censors made a purificatory sacrifice once every five years. The word therefore also meant a five-year period. Pythagoras was famous for valuing silence. "Let us live in corners, and do chores, and suffer, and weep, and drudge, with eyes and hearts that love the Lord. Silence, seclusion, austerity, may pierce deep into the grandeur and secret of our being, and so diving, bring up out of secular darkness, the sublimities of the moral constitution."¹⁹ The aim of such labor was the renewal of "the moral constitution." This constitution was at risk. Emerson's own religious upbringing and training had been thoroughly Unitarian, and Unitarianism was in turn a reform of Puritanism, which had been a reform of Calvinism. In this context, Emerson's use of the images of the monastery – the rule, the hermitage, the asceticism, – appealed to a more ancient Christianity. It may have been because of this that he had to say, "You will pardon me, Gentlemen."

Emerson anticipated that his audience might worry the form of asceticism he enjoined was pointless, in that it hid from the world the fruits of its efforts. Such a worry, he insisted, was unnecessary, given the nature of thought.

You will not fear, that I am enjoining too stern an asceticism. Ask not, Of what use is a scholarship that systematically retreats? or, Who is the better for the philosopher who conceals his accomplishments, and hides his thoughts from the waiting world? Hides his thoughts! Hide the sun and the moon.

Thought could be hidden no more than the sun and the moon could be hidden. This was because, "Thought is all light, and publishes itself to the universe. It will speak, though you were dumb,

¹⁹ Ibid.

by its own miraculous organ. It will flow out of your actions, your manners, and your face. It will bring you friendships."²⁰ Thought cannot help but "publish itself to the universe." Thought takes place in a person, who is necessarily situated in the world, who could no more retreat from the world than he could hide the sun or the moon. And a person's thought has "its own miraculous organ." It "flows out of" the very living of the person who thinks. And crucially it brings him friendships, through which he lives in society, and a society that will welcome his thoughts. Because of this, the ascetic scholar must retire to his hermitage to welcome thought, and trust that thought will, in the end, publish itself to the world.

Thoreau responded to Emerson's use of monastic allusion both by literalizing it, and by playing with it in *Walden*. In perhaps the most playful reference of all to Emerson's call for a more ascetic scholarship, Thoreau describes the fish in Walden Pond as ascetic (IX, 6).

But like Emerson, Thoreau also knew – as North Americans were then only beginning to learn – that Christianity was one among many world religious traditions. And in his wide-ranging reading, he had discovered that Christian ascetics, coenobitic monks for example, had not been the only religious practitioners to discover the benefits of living with less.

Another feature of Emerson's oration "Literary Ethics" was a theory of truth that must have appealed to Thoreau. Emerson said,

Truth is such a flyaway, such a slyboots, so untransportable and unbarrelable a commodity, that it is as bad to catch as light. Shut the shutters never so quick, to keep all the light in, it is all in vain; it is gone before you can cry, Hold. And so it happens with

²⁰ Ibid., 112.

our philosophy. Translate, collate, distill all the systems, it steads you nothing; for truth will not be compelled, in any mechanical manner."²¹

This idea about how truth works would have been part of what made the *Journals* and other ephemeral forms so important to Thoreau. Cameron and Howarth argue that the *Journals* are Thoreau's great work, and it seems like it would have made sense for someone with this theory of truth to develop loyalty to such a form.²²

What is appealing about the *Journals* given this theory of truth is that they do not attempt to compel truth into a mechanical manner. They relate to ideas through time, as thought can only run through time. Thought is a primary way of relating to truth, but without time, there is no thought. This means that what it means to not compel truth in a mechanical manner is to let truth develop over time. This makes Thoreau's cyclical reflections on the seasons over the years of the journal have a significance that may be difficult to see at first. Every thought comes in a context, and develops through time. That old "slyboots" truth must be seduced, with gentle reverence and patience, through daily practice, into an organic, rather than a mechanical form.

This means that philosophy is not a system, as a machine is a system, one that can be ordered with ease into parts. The asceticism is the ordering, the rule, in which thought and thus truth can live.

on Emerson, Thoreau, and history

American nature writing has had a central role in reflection on religion and ecology across the university for some time now. Let's say you take Thoreau as the progenitor of a nature

²¹ Ibid., 103.

²² Sharon Cameron, *Writing Nature: Henry Thoreau's Journal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); William L. Howarth, *The Book of Concord: Thoreau's Life As a Writer* (New York: Viking Press, 1982).

writing tradition that runs down from him through Muir, Leopold, and Abbey to Wendell Berry, Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, and so many others. You needn't think of Thoreau as the beginning, since he had his own sense of progenitors, but you might. Many do. In such a case, you might say that Thoreau's work was a response to what he saw as the failure of the university – his example was Harvard – to take reflection on religion and ecology seriously.

Harvard in Thoreau's generation was focused on recitation and the collection of points to what was considered an absurd extent by students. Teachers were expected to ensure that students got their lessons, and to score their performances in every aspect of college life, but not necessarily to cultivate the lives of the minds of young students. Richardson wrote that "the curriculum was largely fixed and generally detested."²³ Josiah Quincy III had been made the president of Harvard after losing his seventh election to remain mayor of Boston. He was appointed at a moment when Harvard seemed particularly vulnerable. "He had been chosen by the Corporation neither for his scholarly attainments which were considerable, nor his teaching experience which was non-existent, but for his demonstrated capacity to govern the recalcitrant."²⁴ He designed and kept the books on the elaborate, standardized marking system, meant to forestall both the grading that had up to then been left to the discretion of teachers and the complaints of favoritism that such a system risked. In the course of a four-year career, a student could accumulate as many as 29,920 points.²⁵

Students despised Quincy's firm hand. This was true to the extent that in the spring of Thoreau's freshman year, 1834, the most violent student rebellion in Harvard's history broke out. The conflict went on for weeks. Quincy's effigy was burned by the Junior class. In this context,

²³ Robert D. Richardson, *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 10.

²⁴ Robert A. McCaughey, "The Usable Past: A Study of the Harvard College Rebellion of 1834," *William and Mary Law Review* 11, no. 3 (April 1, 1970): 596.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 597.

curricular activity at Harvard may have been attached in Thoreau's mind to the conflict that had raged on campus at Harvard. His extra curricular reading seems to have been more indicative of his interests than any of his schooling.

A big part of what Thoreau found inspiring about his relationship with Emerson was that Emerson had a more capacious understanding of what learning was for, and from whence it came, than the marking system at Harvard would have implied. This included Emerson's philosophy of history, which was based largely on what he knew of German philosophy. Whereas the Harvard curriculum emphasized rote memorization, which set the history it covered at a distance from the students who were obliged to do that memorizing, Emerson believed that history was vivid in a way Thoreau found freeing.

Indeed on Emerson's account, one of the things that nature provided was help understanding what history is and means. I think you can see this in his lecture "Literary Ethics." In the first part, on the resources of the scholar, he describes a young person who is so "intoxicated with his admiration of a hero" from history that he doesn't see the things he has in common with that hero. This is the danger Emerson saw in the form of education being practiced at Harvard; it stressed in history "the distinctions of the individual" rather than "the universal attributes of man."²⁶ The youth in Emerson's illustration has read about the Emperor Charles the Fifth, and in imagining who the Emperor was, "He is curious concerning that man's day. What filled it?" Emerson suggests that if the youth can understand that what he admires in the Emperor he can also find in his own soul, he'll see things – especially the promise of his own life – differently. In response to the youth's question about the Emperor's day, "The soul answers – Behold his day here!" The youth has in common with the Emperor, on Emerson's description, the sighing of the woods, the quiet of gray fields, the cool breeze that sings out of the northern mountains, the

²⁶ Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 99.

hopes of morning, ennui of noon, regrets at want of vigor – all aspects of nature in some sense, those things that exist in the world. Emerson describes features of the world that he thinks will have persisted from the period in which the Emperor lived to the period in which the youth lived. Nature persists. This means that the world we belong to is like that world in which our heroes lived. Which in turn means that the things we admire in them are also accessible to us. What was a day of his? "Day of all that are born of women."²⁷

This, in turn and perhaps counter intuitively, means that a person ought not think of himself as living at the climax of history. To do so would be to misunderstand history itself.

The whole value of history, of biography, is to increase my self-trust, by demonstrating what man can be and do. This is the moral of the Plutarchs, the Cudworths, the Tennemanns, who give us the story of men or of opinions. Any history of philosophy fortifies my faith, by showing me, that what high dogmas I had supposed were the rare and late fruit of a cumulative culture, and only now possible to some recent Kant or Fichte, – were the prompt improvisations of the earliest inquirers; of Parmenides, Heraclitus, and Xenophanes.²⁸

Emerson is famously a perfectionist – in that he thought that humans could always attain a better self. But this feature of his philosophy of history shows that he did not think perfectionism was inevitable in history. Moral progress was uncertain and required moral effort by individuals in every age. This contributed to the central argument of the conclusion of *Walden*, that there is no moral progress without moral effort.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 98.

According to this view of Emerson's, every telling of history uncovers both something about the teller and an important feature of the past itself, a feature only discoverable by that telling of history.

Is it not the lesson of our experience that every man, were life long enough, would write history for himself? What else do these volumes of extracts and manuscript commentaries, that every scholar writes, indicate? Greek history is one thing to me; another to you.²⁹

This is not to say that all is relative, because there is of course the material record to which each of us is obligated. But in this understanding of the nature of history, it is our uncovering of the past, as it speaks now. One of the things that education can give is the capacity to see the history we have been taught through our own eyes.

This was what enabled Thoreau to connect, as he did, his daily life in the woods – like the wars of the ants – to the heroic periods he knew from classical history. History was always encroaching, sneaking through the cracks of the present. And this, in turn, enabled Thoreau to believe that he might himself, though living far from heroes, write a heroic book. The same spirit that had inspired Virgil's *Georgics* lived on, even in Concord.

It also means that the profusion of interpretations of Thoreau reflect how Emerson and Thoreau themselves thought of history. Controversy over what to make of Thoreau began even before he died, and has continued unabated ever since. Interpretations can be more and less justified by the evidence, but the understanding of history that Emerson gave Thoreau would have indicated not that one account of Thoreau will be vindicated in some far future, but instead that we learn more than we knew before from each person's telling – both about the teller and about the people and places in his story. Were life long enough, each of us would have her own

²⁹ Ibid., 103.

Thoreau. This requires that we embrace readings of him across what we now call disciplines, though of course even to separate them is somewhat of an anachronism, since in Thoreau's period they were not what they are now.

social history

Where the mainstream view among interpreters is that Thoreau was a transcendentalist, my interpretation seeks to draw him to a certain extent away from the historiography of transcendentalism – which has so often focused on famous men – and back into the diverse world in which Thoreau actually lived. In this, I have been inspired by historians who have challenged our assumptions about what sorts of histories the sources enable us to tell, especially women's historians and historians of African American communities. From these historians I have learned that to claim we lack sources is often a sophisticated way of perpetuating a silence that was always unjust. As Albert Raboteau wrote in his groundbreaking *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution,"* "it is the neglect of slave sources by historians which has been the main cause of this invisibility."³⁰ In women's history, too, historians have often assumed that sources did not exist. But those historians who have uncovered histories of everyday people, people who left less of a written record than the elite who have generally made history, have inspired my interpretation of Thoreau.

I make use of the broadening of history accomplished by the social historians of the past fifty years. Most readings of Thoreau across the study of religion and ecology situate Thoreau in the history of ideas, whether as a transcendentalist, an inheritor of classical sources, or the progenitor of the nature writing tradition that so deeply influenced – for good or for ill – the environmental

³⁰ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), x.

movement. My starting point is, rather, to situate Thoreau in US labor and social history, including especially the history of working women, free black people, and those who defied enslavement. In this I join a small but growing edge of Thoreau scholarship, led especially by Lance Newman's *Our Common Dwelling*, which insists that the material and economic context of Thoreau's writing has been largely neglected.³¹ While Thoreau is famous for his opposition to slavery, that opposition is most often read apart from Thoreau's interest in nature. I read these two strands together. His focus in *Walden* was, after all, not only on contemplation of nature, but also on doing his own work. This was, I think, his way of finding out the material needs of citizens and resisting forms of unjust labor.

Local history was of great interest to Thoreau. Take, for example, the passage in *Walden* on the former inhabitants of the woods. Later in his life, Thoreau was especially interested in the history of the native people of the Americas, he planned to write a book on the subject. But even early, in the period he spent living in Walden Woods, Thoreau was invested in knowing the history of the place. As with much else in his life, he thought he could learn this history from nature, by which he meant the world he could observe. And so he went on a walk in the woods. Not only a natural historian, but an oral historian as well, as we often forget, Thoreau took his knowledge of the past from the world around him, and from the people he knew. This was a walk through woods that, he wrote, "Within the memory of many of my townsmen...resounded with the laugh and gossip of inhabitants." He remembered when the road was heavily covered by pines, so close that they "would scrape both sides of the chaise at once" (XIV, 1). Thoreau goes on to spend a paragraph on each of four formerly enslaved black people who had occupied the woods before him.

³¹ Lance Newman, *Our Common Dwelling: Henry Thoreau, Transcendentalism, and the Class Politics of Nature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

This meant that history was alive for Thoreau in ways we might sometimes find quite foreign. Same too with what he called nature. Indeed, as I have said, one of the reasons that nature is as important for Thoreau as it is, is that it allows access to what the heroes had. The meaning of histories stayed in places, and the meaning of the leaf could be found in the tree.

As Susan Petrulionis and Laura Dassow Walls wrote in 2007, with reference to Lance Newman's "Thoreau's Materialism," attention to the concrete historical situation in which Thoreau wrote *Walden* offers new views on how its contents reveal Thoreau's own political aims, even when his writing seems most politically sedate.³²

chapter plan

The dissertation is divided into six chapters. The first four chapters are focused on responding to common interpretations of Thoreau as, first, fiercely independent, second, inconsequential with respect to politics, and, third, spiritually eccentric to the point of being irreligious. Too often, the Thoreau of *Walden* is imagined as asocial, apolitical, and areligious. By way of addressing these caricatures, the first four chapters respond to each in turn. The first chapter, "Thoreau's Society" presents a view of his time in the woods as taking up membership in an alternative society – not the one people expected him to belong to, admittedly, but a society nonetheless. The second chapter, "Thoreau's Politics," describes the ways in which Thoreau's time in the woods instantiated his political views in ways the literature does not usually highlight. The third and fourth chapters, "Thoreau's Religion," describe the practices Thoreau took up in the woods as motivated by religious commitments. Chapter Three is a close reading of Thoreau's critique of philanthropy at the end of "Economy." This critique was motivated by

³² Sandra Harbert Petrulionis and Laura Dassow Walls, eds., *More Day to Dawn: Thoreau's Walden for the Twentyfirst Century* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 244, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vk3vk>.

Christian theological commitments. Chapter Four is a broader examination of Thoreau's interest in ascetic practice and voluntary poverty.

The fifth and sixth chapters change focus to issues related to genre, form, and the ethics of writing. Chapter Five, "The Woodchopper," discusses one of the persistent tensions in pastoral literature through Thoreau's portrait of the woodchopper he met in the woods and argues that there exists in the tradition of Romanticism an ongoing conversation about the ethics of representation. Chapter Six, "Delight in True Goods," is focused on the puzzling coincidence of Thoreau's earnestness with his humor. I argue that there are some things that are best articulated while laughing.

Chapter 1 - Thoreau's Society

Confucius says truly, "Virtue does not remain as an abandoned orphan; it must of necessity have neighbors."

Walden, (V, 10)

One of the most popularly salient images of Thoreau taken from *Walden* is Thoreau as an asocial hermit, whether an honest one or a hypocrite. The Honest Hermit view sees his time in the woods as a praiseworthy retreat from other people in pursuit of higher values among nature. The Hypocrite Hermit view takes his forays into town – his mother's doing his laundry especially – as a sign that while he aimed to look holy out there in his hermitage, and would have been holy if he had achieved what he claimed, he did not live up to his own standard. Both of these views respond to those passages where Thoreau describes his avoidance of society and his appreciation of solitude. And they take him quite literally at his word when he writes things like "I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating" (V, 12). Those two views also leave open two other possibilities: first, that even if he was not a hypocrite, his aim was not praiseworthy – that is, being a hermit does not let you pursue higher values anyway; and fourth, the view I will defend, that the aim of living without society was never really his anyway, because the higher values he pursued were intimately related to society, or to relationship with others.

Against an asocial reading of *Walden*, I argue that Thoreau's longing for solitude was tied to his deep interest and investment in (if also discomfort with) the dynamics of social life. There are a few main reasons to take this view. The first and most obvious is that Thoreau describes the

social relationships he had in the woods in *Walden*, and the terms in which he describes them make clear that he also valued them. Even in his first few days at the pond, when – if he was bent on enforcing a rigorous solitude – we would expect him to avoid human contact, he records in his journal conversations with a man he met there, Alek Therien, who becomes his friend *while* he is living in the woods. Not only did Thoreau go to Walden Woods with friendships and familial relationships that he maintained; he also cultivated new relationships there, both intimate and remote.

Second, and less commonly discussed by readers of Thoreau, he was invested in a vision of social life that included more-than-human and more-than-living beings, or, as he usually called the social actors of the woods: "inhabitants."³³ It is easier to understand him as asocial (though still, I think, incorrect) when the only social actors you acknowledge are living human beings; but it is nearly impossible to maintain the asocial view when you take animals, plants, and the human dead as involved in social life and relationship. Thoreau thought such beings were part of the social world and describes cultivating relationship to them, whether by keeping appointments with trees, weeding beans, or by "conjuring" the now-dead "former inhabitants" of Walden Woods. This interpretation of Thoreau's sociality as including the objects, plants, animals, and human dead relates to a growing field of scholarship being conducted across the humanities and social sciences – often under the rubric 'multispecies' and indebted to the work of critical theory – which shows just how diverse social networks are, and how much we miss of social life when we limit our understanding of 'the social' to 'the living human.'³⁴

³³ The phrase "more-than-human" was coined (perhaps first by David Abram) to replace "non-human," in the conviction that "non-human" placed moral priority on humans in a way that abetted human domination of other forms of life. "More-than-living" is not common in current usage.

³⁴ Bruno Latour and actor-network theory were influential in the development of this line of thinking. See, for example, Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-*

With all this in mind, this chapter argues against a view that sees the Thoreau of *Walden* having departed from society in general, that sees him as asocial. Rather, I show a tension in Thoreau's writing between his desire for solitude and his investment in community. I demonstrate Thoreau keeping company with a community of spirit that is peopled by exemplary individuals – both dead and alive, both flora and fauna. Among the individuals who Thoreau took as neighbors in Walden Woods, some are easily legible as social actors. Alek Therien was a woodchopper who lived in the woods, and who Thoreau developed a relationship with from his first days living by the pond. Others are less obvious, but no less important. Thoreau's writing describes an experience of the woods that is full of personality, of alternative society. Beginning with his relationships with animals, plants, and non-living objects, and going on through his knowledge of the "Former Inhabitants" of the woods, who people usually forget but who were one important example Thoreau had of what independence looked like, the woods as Thoreau described them *were* a society. When we ignore the beings who made up his social world, we get a distorted view of what the aim of what he called his "experiment" was. I use Thoreau's writing about the woods and the history of Concord slavery – which Thoreau helped to write – to show that his vision of society was broader and deeper than we might think.

Network-Theory (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Donna Harraway and Anna Tsing have been especially influential in this field lately. For examples of recent work in this line of scholarship, see the May 2016 issue of *Environmental Humanities*, especially Vinciane Despret and Michel Meuret, "Cosmoecological Sheep and the Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet," *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 1 (May 1, 2016): 24–36; Hugo Reinert, "About a Stone Some Notes on Geologic Conviviality," *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 1 (May 1, 2016): 95–117.

the village and the woods

One reason that people have an image of Thoreau as avoiding society at Walden is that in *Walden* Thoreau plays with a conceptual pair that has been central to the long tradition of pastoral literature. This is the dynamic tension between the "country" and the "city," or in his case between "the village" and "the woods." When Thoreau describes his life in the woods, and its distance from the village, he is not merely insisting on his remoteness. To do so would have been to take for granted that the village was the epicenter of society, which he refused to do. Instead, he was testing the categories themselves, which rely on one another. The woods are wild only relative to the village, and the village is civilized only in comparison to the woods. Thoreau thinks the way these concepts are tied together has significance, in that which location is thought primary can be switched. This switch is one of the things that *Walden* tries to do, to make the woods the center of a world and thus test the view that life in the village is somehow primary.

Thoreau began *Walden* with a paragraph that suggested his home by Walden Pond was remote from society.

When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only. I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again. (I, 1)

With this first paragraph, Thoreau introduced the book that would eventually make him famous, and he did it in specifically spatial terms. In three sentences, he implied that the house at Walden Pond had been a retreat from society – he lived there "alone" – and that it had been a retreat to somewhere somewhat desolate – now he is in "civilized life again." What then was his life "in the woods"? The implication is that life in the woods was the opposite of civilized in some way,

"a mile from any neighbor." At first, this reads like an insistence of the way his life in the woods was a retreat from society. The mile from his closest neighbor insuring that he does not confront other people.

But this measure, one mile, introduces a perspectival puzzle that Thoreau plays with for the rest of the book. As with the relative significance of "the village" and "the woods," one mile can be very far, as this paragraph implies that it is, or very short, as one mile is when made relative to the "dozen miles" in which Thoreau describes looking for a place to live (II, 1).

The paragraph also has a playful tone, especially at its end. The sentence "At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again," initiates the reader to Thoreau's sense of humor, which is very dry. It also suggests, as the rest of the book continues to do, that there is a certain play between "the woods" and "civilization." A sojourner is one who visits, and the last sentence suggests that Thoreau's time in the woods has accomplished the switch that I have suggested the book aims to make, to take a view of the woods as primary, as the center, as home, and a view of so-called civilized life as a place to visit on the periphery.

Thoreau demonstrates a similar sense of play between center and periphery at the beginning of the next chapter too. In "Where I Lived, and What I Lived for" Thoreau describes a period in which he searched for a place to live. That chapter begins, "At a certain season of our life we are accustomed to consider every spot as the possible site of a house. I have thus surveyed the country on every side within a dozen miles of where I live." (II, 1) Thoreau was a surveyor; he was hired to measure and map land. He probably referred here both to his professional activities and to his walks around Concord. He describes how he thought about the places he visited.

Wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly. What is a house but a *sedes*, a seat?—better if a country seat. I discovered many a site for a

house not likely to be soon improved, which some might have thought too far from the village, but to my eyes the village was too far from it. (II, 1)

Thoreau insists here, again and explicitly, on a perspectival shift from the one usually taken by those who live in the village, even those who enjoy outings to the woods. When he visited each place, he took *it* as the center, the place from which outings would occur; "the landscape radiated from me" suggests this. And some of the places he visited might have had much distance between them and the village, too much, even in Thoreau's view. But whereas "some might have thought [it] too far from the village," to Thoreau "the village was too far from it." Here, importantly, he does not suggest that how far away the village is does not matter; rather, he insists that any place, no matter how remote from the village, can be a center.

This takes part in a long tradition of pastoral literature that describes life outside of cities, but in which the dynamic between country and city is always being constructed. In the pastoral imagination, the country is often the seat of rural, agricultural life. The city is the cultural center, where intellectual life and the arts flourish. As Raymond Williams argued in *The Country and the City*, the history of rural and urban settlements is intensely varied – stereotypes will never capture the diversity of actual human settlements. And yet persistent images have grown up around the words 'country' and 'city.'

On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a

place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation.³⁵

Those images collect especially persistently in our literature. And Williams analyzed this dynamic, between the images of the country and the city, especially but not only in British literature. What he found was that these words, and this dynamic in British literature, had collected images that have to do with the development of capitalism as an economic form. Thoreau's writing is caught up in the tradition that Williams described. Going to the woods was in part Thoreau's resistance to the industrial economy he saw overtaking what he viewed as traditional economies of the region. I shall discuss this further in Chapter Two.

A second significance of Thoreau's play with location and space has to do with the conceptual issue of center and periphery I have already mentioned. Cities are often taken to be centers, with country as their surrounding periphery. But where the center is in any field is a completely perspectival question. What is described as center and what as periphery is dependent on what is taken to be important in the field. Like orthodoxy and heresy, center and periphery are shaped mightily by the position of the person doing the categorization. In *Walden*, Thoreau insisted that where he chose to live, no matter its relation to the village, would be the seat, or center.³⁶

³⁵ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 1.

³⁶ This, in turn, relates to the dependence of knowledge on the situation of the knower. I take it that knowledge is, like judgments about center and periphery, contextual, and Thoreau's play with the concepts of village and woods opens onto one of the persistent epistemological problems of the modern period, one that has only become more pressing, and interesting, over the course of the last century. The issue is this: whereas philosophy since Descartes has aimed to secure knowledge against skepticism, to assure us that our knowledge corresponds to an objective world, it has often tried to do this at the expense of our actual relationship to that objective world. Kant insisted that our knowing comes to us through *a priori* conditions, what he tried to enumerate as the categories. When we insist that knowledge comes through the relation of the knower to the object of knowledge, then we raise the specter of relativism, and some say we can never know anything. But knowledge *is* relative, it is based on relationship, as the woods

seeming asociality/"solitude"

This interest in the self as the seat of knowledge sometimes makes Thoreau seem selfish. Like Wordsworth's before him, Thoreau's writing exhibits a focus on self-understanding that some read as selfishness, a fault of his character. Something like this was what Keats (under the influence of Hazlitt's disappointment with Wordsworth) criticized in the famous phrase: "wordsworthian or egotistical sublime." An interpretation in this vein would paint a picture of Thoreau as an asocial hermit and a cranky misanthrope. It would say that his loves were impersonal, mostly not for humans to boot. It would conjecture that sharing a room or a life with him would prove difficult, and that this is a bad sign if we are evaluating his character. This interpretation would emphasize Thoreau's insistence on being alone, on his love of solitude.

and the village are relative. I can know only things that I can experience in some way, and what I experience has everything to do with where I am in space and time. This explains what Stanley Cavell in *The Senses of Walden* described as Thoreau's difference from Kant. He wrote,

I am convinced that Thoreau had the Kantian idea right, that the objects of our knowledge require a transcendental (or we may say, grammatical or phenomenological) preparation; that we know just what meets the *a priori* conditions of our knowing anything *überhaupt*. These *a priori* conditions are necessities of human nature; and the search for them is something I think Thoreau's obsession with necessity is meant to declare. His difference from Kant on this point is that these *a priori* conditions are not themselves knowable *a priori*, but are to be discovered experimentally; historically, Hegel had said.

Walden is also, accordingly, a response to skepticism, and not just in matters of knowledge. Epistemologically, its motive is the recovery of the object, in the form in which Kant left that problem and the German Idealists and the Romantic poets picked it up, viz., a recovery of the thing-in-itself; in particular, of the relation between the subject of knowledge and its object. Morally, its motive is to answer, by transforming, the problem of the freedom of the will in the midst of a universe of natural laws, by which our conduct, like the rest of nature, is determined. *Walden*, in effect, provides a transcendental deduction for the concepts of the thing-in-itself and for determination—something Kant ought, so to speak, to have done.

This means that Thoreau's construction of place in *Walden* has to do with one of the central epistemological puzzles of our time.

Many readers take the quintessential description of Thoreau's refusal of society to be in the "Conclusion" when Thoreau famously writes that, "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away" (XVIII, 10). The image sometimes seems to suggest that the man who hears a different drummer should take leave from "his companions," which is to say from all other band members. But that reading of this passage misses the point Thoreau is making, as does the contemporary idiom that has sprung from this line: 'marching to the beat of your own drum,' which is importantly different from what Thoreau actually wrote. Someone who marches to the beat of "a different drummer" is still following "the music which he hears." He is not – as the asocial reading implies and the contemporary idiom makes explicit – drumming his own beat, off on his own. He is following a different bandleader. The metaphor is ambivalent about society. It suggests there is more than one band you might join.

But in some of the most famous portions of *Walden* Thoreau does seem to seek an escape from society. The most straightforward place to find textual evidence that seems to count against my thesis that Thoreau is social is "Solitude," the fifth chapter of *Walden*. Here, Thoreau describes what it is like to be in the woods alone, and he delights in the space he has to himself. "For the most part it is as solitary where I live as on the prairies. It is as much Asia or Africa as New England. I have, as it were, my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world all to myself" (V, 3). Here, Thoreau revels in the distance he has from ordinary New England society. He has "a little world" all to himself, without intrusion except for when, in the spring, some come to fish for pouts in the pond. Even they were always gone by night. He counts this world "all to himself" a good thing. And his description of what he likes about it—being solitary, having his own world—might make him seem asocial. He is avoiding company after all.

Similarly, later in the section he responds to those who ask whether he doesn't get lonely out in the woods. "Men frequently say to me, 'I should think you would feel lonesome down there, and want to be nearer to folks, rainy and snowy days and nights especially'" (V, 5). If Thoreau did want society, you might think, he would sometimes be lonely. But Thoreau dismisses this loneliness question. "Why should I feel lonely? Is not our planet in the Milky Way? This which you put seems to me not the most important question." Instead, Thoreau asks, "What do we want most to dwell near to? Not to many men surely, the depot, the post-office, the bar-room, the meeting-house, the school-house, the grocery, Beacon Hill, or the Five Points, where men most congregate, but to the perennial source of our life." For him, apparently, the woods serve well as a life-source, despite being remote from "where most men congregate." Even more emphatically, he writes, "I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude" (V, 12). This quotation supports a reading of Thoreau as departing from society. At Walden Pond, this text suggests, Thoreau found at last the solitude that he thought most satisfying.

These texts (and many others) push against my reading of Thoreau as seeking society at Walden Pond. In them he insists that lacking human society does him no harm. They argue, further, that being alone actually enables him to draw close to the source of his life.

Dwelling on them, however, ignores texts in the same pages that describe another kind of society, the one I argue Thoreau found at Walden. Thoreau may sometimes say he is alone in the woods, but his writing tells a different story. Just as Thoreau's spatial descriptions of Walden play with the conceptual pair of country and city, in "Solitude" Thoreau plays with the tension

between solitude and society. The very first paragraph of "Solitude" shows a community of creatures and other phenomena in which Thoreau takes delight.

This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me. The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whippoorwill is borne on the rippling wind from over the water. Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled. These small waves raised by the evening wind are as remote from storm as the smooth reflecting surface. Though it is now dark, the wind still blows and roars in the wood, the waves still dash, and some creatures lull the rest with their notes. The repose is never complete. The wildest animals do not repose, but seek their prey now; the fox, and skunk, and rabbit, now roam the fields and woods without fear. They are Nature's watchmen, – links which connect the days of animated life. (V, 1)

Whereas readers might imagine the woods are empty, imagine that solitude entails being alone, Thoreau demonstrates the society he finds on the shores of Walden Pond. The trumpets of the bullfrogs announce the coming night, and an announcement implies a community of hearers. Thoreau has "sympathy" with the leaves in the trees, a social feeling. The wind "blows" and "roars." Some creatures sing to lull others to sleep, and other creatures stay awake serving as "watchmen." Thoreau may have been the only human on the shore of the pond that evening, but he was not alone. The days at Walden are full of "animated life."

Even more strikingly, Thoreau himself describes the society he found, even when supposedly alone. After responding to the question about loneliness by describing his "little world all to myself," Thoreau describes the way in which he wasn't, after all, alone. "Yet I experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object, even for the poor misanthrope and most melancholy man" (V, 4).³⁷ He was sometimes at a remove from other humans, but he found society in objects, and storms, and rain. He goes on to write about "the friendship of the seasons," and then, about the sympathy he received from pine needles. Usually he did not feel lonesome, but there was one time when he did. "I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude, but once, and that was a few weeks after I came to the woods, when, for an hour, I doubted if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life. To be alone was something unpleasant." But he was comforted by

sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant, and I have never thought of them since. Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me. I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred to me, even in scenes which we are accustomed to call wild and dreary, and also that the nearest of blood to me and humanest was not a person or a villager, that I thought no place could ever be strange to be again.

(V, 4)

Thoreau found "society in Nature," where he felt "something kindred." He was sustained by an "unaccountable friendliness" in the "pattering of the drops." This line, "unaccountable

³⁷ This may be an allusion to Wordsworth's poem, "On the Influence of Natural Objects."

friendliness" acknowledges the strangeness of having society with Nature. It participates, too, in Thoreau's play with the language of finance and accounting. The friendliness he experiences is unaccountable in many senses: the friends he finds do not offer an account of themselves and neither can he say what their friendship is or where it comes from. No one can count the value of such friendship in numbers. "The fancied advantages of human neighborhood" were replaced by the sympathy and friendship of the pine needles.

Thoreau sets this society in Nature – "like an atmosphere sustaining" him – against the patterns of other sorts of society. "Society is commonly too cheap. We meet at very short intervals, not having had time to acquire any new value for each other. We meet at meals three times a day, and give each other a new taste of that old musty cheese that we are" (V, 13). Society is cheap when we make it cheap, by meeting too frequently without attention to whether those meetings are good for us or not. But society needn't be that way. In the final pages of "Solitude" Thoreau describes visits from "an old settler" and "an elderly dame." The settler "is thought to be dead" and the dame is "invisible to most persons," but they provide Thoreau with the sort of society he values. Thoreau finds at Walden an alternative way of being in society.

Thoreau did delight in leaving the society that characterizes cities: close neighbors, bustle, and Beacon Hill. But he found another sort of society in the woods, one that nourished his human needs even as it tutored him in the bonds of community we can have with winds, and leaves, and frogs if we will spend time among them.

Thoreau's writing is complicated to be sure. What society, rightly understood, ought to be is a central puzzle in it, and there are certainly some social circumstances he clearly wanted to avoid. This does not make him asocial. My claim is that in going to Walden Thoreau did not retreat from society in general, but left one society and joined another: a spiritual community of

exemplary creatures, places, and former inhabitants he thought formed the finest society he could imagine at the time. He sought out the social company of marginal figures who lived in the woods both in the present and the past.

living people/"visitors"

Just as Thoreau's description of his retreat to Walden Woods was slightly tongue-in-cheek, in that he did not go very far but still lived and wrote as though he had, so Thoreau's insistence on his aloneness there was also moderated, not only as I have described by his social feeling for beings we do not typically consider part of human community, but also by his relationships to human community. The chapter I have just been discussing, "Solitude," is followed by one called "Visitors." This juxtaposition in itself expresses the dynamic I am trying to describe. "Solitude" offers a description of Thoreau's being alone in the woods that transforms the seeming solitude into society, if admittedly of an atypical sort that includes animals, plants, objects, and weather. Then "Visitors" considers hospitality as a practice, and describes how hospitality is better when there is some distance between the people who come together. Together, these two chapters show Thoreau offering an alternative view of what society should be, how it should work, and what it should be for, but not a rejection wholesale of being with other people.

It is not hard to find evidence in *Walden* of Thoreau's obviously social habits. In "Visitors," Thoreau even wrote about a big party in his tiny house. "It is surprising how many great men and women a small house will contain. I have had twenty-five or thirty souls, with their bodies, at once under my roof" (VI, 2). And later, in "The Village," he writes about his near daily visits to the village.

Every day or two I strolled to the village to hear some of the gossip which is incessantly going on there, circulating from mouth to mouth, or from newspaper to newspaper, and

which, taken in homœopathic doses, was really as refreshing in its way as the rustle of leaves and the peeping of frogs. (VIII, 1)

Just as the woods offered opportunities for looking, and seeing, and being with, so too the village. He carries his powers of observation with him from the woods on his outings to town, "to see the men and boys," and "to observe their habits." He shows himself to be an astute ethnographer of his own country: "I observed that the vitals of the village were the grocery, the bar-room, the post-office, and the bank" (VIII, 1).

"Visitors" begins with Thoreau's own insistence that he is "no hermit."

I think that I love society as much as most, and am ready enough to fasten myself like a bloodsucker for the time to any full-blooded man that comes in my way. I am naturally no hermit, but might possibly sit out the sturdiest frequenter of the bar-room, if my business called me thither.

I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society.

(VI, 1)

Despite his love of solitude, then, Thoreau is not asocial. He had friends who came to see him in the woods, and he welcomed them.

"Visitors" is also where we meet Alek Therien, a man whom Thoreau met in his first days living in the woods, in 1845. In "Visitors" Therien has been translated out of the *Journal* and into *Walden* as a heroic figure, "a true Homeric or Paphlagonian man." I further discuss the significance of the portrait of the woodchopper, the model for whom was Alek Therien, in Chapter Five. The point at the moment is that if Thoreau had been hoping to enforce a rigorous apartness from other people, we would expect his interactions with Therien to be quite different than they were in those first weeks in the woods. He moved on July 4th, and on July 14th wrote in

his journal about meeting Therien as well as the five railroad men I described in the Preface. Then, on July 16th, Therien comes to call. The journal describes Therien in detail (which is largely copied into the portrait of the woodchopper in *Walden*) on March 13th, 1846. And then some time after December 23, 1845 and before March 26, 1846, less than a year after Thoreau's moving to the woods, Thoreau and Therien share a social experience that includes a bird. It is useful to recall that Therien was Canadian and spoke French. The *Journal* describes it thus:

Therien the wood chopper was here yesterday—and while I was cutting wood some chickadees hopped near pecking the bark and chips and the potatoe skins I had thrown out— What do you call them he asked— I told him—what do *you* call them asked I— *Mezezenze* I think he said. When I eat my dinner in the woods said he sitting very still having kindled a fire to warm my coffee—they come and light on my arm and peck at the potatoe in my fingers— I like to have the little fellers about me—

Just then one flew up from the snow and perched on the wood I was holding in my arms and pecked it and looked me familiarly in the face. Chica-a-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee, — while others were whistling phebe-phe-bee—in the woods behind the house. (2:191)

This passage strikes me as a vivid example of the sort of society Thoreau cultivated in the woods. In the short interaction, Therien and Thoreau share caring mutual curiosity about one another's languages. Then Therien describes his own relationship to the chickadees he knows in the woods. And then a chickadee joins their circle, speaking its own language (one of the most complex among animals as it happens) and looking "familiarly." In this case, the social occasion included Therien and the bird.

Edward Waldo Emerson wrote *Henry Thoreau: As Remembered by a Young Friend*, which was published in 1917. He wrote it in part as a defense, and for this reason it sometimes reads

like hagiography more than history. Nonetheless, I think what Emerson wrote about Thoreau's respect for animals suggests that his sociality with living humans and with other living creatures in the woods were related.

He felt real respect for the personality and character of animals, and could never have been guilty of asking with Paul, "Doth God care for oxen?" The humble little neighbors in house or wood whose characters he thus respected, rewarded his regard by some measure of friendly confidence. He felt that until men showed higher behaviour, the less they said about the "lower animals" the better.

For all life he had reverence, and just where the limits of conscious life began and ended he was too wise, and too hopeful, to say.³⁸

Edward Emerson's description is of a man exceptionally attuned to life in the woods. But the passage about Thoreau, Therien, and the chickadee shows us that Thoreau was not some kind of raving loner who was odd because he thought he could talk to birds. Therien, too, likes "to have the little fellers about." And the chickadee himself, whose language we do not know, gets a word into the account. "Chica-a-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee."³⁹

It may be, too, that the chickadee's language would have been familiar to Therien and Thoreau, who spent so much time in the woods. Contemporary research, conducted through close observation in controlled settings, has suggested that the "chick-a-dee" call is among the most complex animal communication we know.⁴⁰ Spending time among the chickadees could have taught Thoreau something about what chickadees mean when they call – when they are far

³⁸ Edward Waldo Emerson, *Henry Thoreau: As Remembered by a Young Friend* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1917), 82–83.

³⁹ The bird's "chic-a-dee" is also quoted in Emerson's poem, "The Titmouse," written and published in 1862, the year Thoreau died.

⁴⁰ Christopher N. Templeton, Erick Greene, and Kate Davis, "Allometry of Alarm Calls: Black-Capped Chickadees Encode Information about Predator Size," *Science* 308, no. 5730 (2005): 1934–37.

enough away from their fellows that they cannot see one another, but not so far away that they cannot call out seeking a response. They call to alert their fellows to danger. They call to ask "are you here with me?" They call to encourage others to join them, to resist a threat. (This variant of the "chick-a-dee" call is described by contemporary literature as "mobbing calls," and the flock that joins in the harassment of the predator is described as "mobbing behavior.") Chickadees publish their worries abroad, and they wait for a reply from their friends.⁴¹

dead people

The respect Thoreau had for living creatures meant that the form of society he lived was atypical. It included inhabitants of the woods who other people might exclude from society, like oxen or chickadees. But I think even "living beings" does not properly describe Thoreau's society; he included the now-dead as well. One of the key texts that supports this view is a chapter in the last part of the book, where readers rarely focus attention, entitled "Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors." Here, I think Thoreau's attention to the former inhabitants of Walden Woods should suggest to us that they too, though now dead, were among the society Thoreau joined in the woods. They also suggest, as I discuss at length in the next chapter, that Thoreau's form of life in the woods was more political than we usually notice.

The first notable thing about this chapter is its doubled title. Only the second chapter, "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," has a title that includes more than a singular topic. Other chapter titles include, "Economy," "Sounds," "Visitors," "Higher Laws," and "Spring." "Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors" thus represents the coordination of two seemingly separate

⁴¹ Jeffrey Stout pointed out that that there was more for me to learn about chickadees before I assumed that their language was indecipherable, and that their call ("Can you hear me? Will you join me?") resonated so closely with the message of *Walden*. It was characteristically respectful (of the chickadee) and creative on his part.

topics into one subject. It could be that Thoreau made the choice to include the two topics together because neither had the material for the length of the chapter he planned. But given the variation among chapter lengths in the rest of the book, I do not think this is likely.

It is more plausible to think that Thoreau coordinated these two topics for thematic reasons; the former inhabitants are *among* the winter visitors. *Walden* is organized around the seasons of one year. Thoreau arrives in the woods in July, and the chapters trace seasonal changes. While he lived in the woods for two years, the book collates both years into one seasonal story, so that the major principle of organization in the book is the changing of the weather, and the woods, and the behavior of animals, as well as the work required for Thoreau to live in each of the different periods of the year. The book ends in spring, in part as an emphatic insistence on the promise of morning and associated aim of spiritual awakening that Thoreau weaves through the whole book. The winter months thus appear in the chapters leading up to the end of the book. And in this particular chapter, Thoreau introduces his reflections on former inhabitants by the fact of his aloneness, especially in that period. He wrote, "For human society I was obliged to conjure up the former occupants of these woods" (XIV, 1). In the winter, when he spent more time inside and alone than usual, he conjured the former occupants of the woods in order to enjoy human society that was lacking in that season.

But read the sentence again. "For human society I was obliged to conjure up the former occupants of these woods" (XIV, 1). It refers not only to the human society Thoreau found for himself in the woods. It may also refer to the society beyond Walden Woods that Thoreau hoped to reach by writing *Walden*. He conjured the former occupants of the woods not only so that he could enjoy their company, but also on behalf of broader human society.

Now, it may be surprising that Walden Woods, as Thoreau describes his neighborhood, ever had occupants before Thoreau. The popular image of Thoreau's retreat to the woods has him aiming to live outside of society in intense solitude. This was an image Thoreau knew people had, and which he in some sense cultivated, even within the pages where he describes the people who lived there before him.

But against the caricature of Thoreau as living in untouched wilderness, his writing shows that he had historical consciousness and curiosity about the place that he lived, and that he was interested in what had come before. The nineteen-paragraph discussion of the neighborhood as a neighborhood, as what had been – as he wrote – a "small village," shows that the place had a history, had been a location where people made their homes. He wrote, "Within the memory of many of my townsmen the road near which my house stands resounded with the laugh and gossip of inhabitants, and the woods which boarder it were notched and dotted here and there with their little gardens and dwellings" (XIV, 1). This suggests that Thoreau had conducted something like what we now call oral history about "the memory" of his "townsmen," as a way to learn what had been before him in the woods he came to occupy. I find it easy to imagine that this may have been one of the things Thoreau liked to gossip about in the village of his own period. However he came to know what he did, he is one of our best historians of the people who had occupied Walden Woods, situated between Concord and Lincoln, in the generation before him. As it happens, many but not all of these people had been formerly enslaved free black people, members of the last generation of northern slavery. Thoreau describes four free black people whose homes had been close to where he built his own along the northern shore of Walden Pond.

The first of the people whose ruined homes Thoreau describes is Cato.

East of my bean-field, across the road, lived Cato Ingraham, slave of Duncan Ingraham, Esquire, gentleman of Concord village; who built his slave a house, and gave him permission to live in Walden Woods;—Cato, not Uticensis, but Concordiensis. Some say that he was a Guinea Negro. There are a few who remember his little patch among the walnuts, which he let grow up till he should be old and need them; but a younger and whiter speculator got them at last. He too, however, occupies an equally narrow house at present. Cato's half-obliterated cellar hole still remains, though known to few, being concealed from the traveller by a fringe of pines. It is now filled with the smooth sumach, (*Rhus glabra*,) and one of the earliest species of goldenrod (*Solidago stricta*) grows there luxuriantly. (XIV, 2)

Three things about this passage are important to note. First, one of the key features of the description has to do with what Cato did in order to live independently. He prepared for his old age by growing walnuts that would feed him and presumably be available to barter for other goods. Second, though he worked to live independently, Cato never got to enjoy the proceeds of his labors. "A younger whiter speculator got them at last." Though the phrase "narrow house" had been used by Thoreau in "Economy" to describe a grave, and therefore might suggest that Thoreau was referring to an unidentified though now dead person, I suspect that the "younger and whiter speculator" was Thoreau, who quite proudly occupied a narrow house himself during his time at Walden, and often used ironic financial puns, like "speculator," to describe his own activities. The third thing to note is that the end of the paragraph describes the remains of Cato's house as a ruin being overtaken by plants. There is the "half-obliterated cellar hole" obscured from view by the pines, and filled with sumach and goldenrod. These three features – first what Cato did to live independently, second the sense in which the plan did not work out, and third the

description of his former home as a ruin – unite Thoreau's descriptions of the first two former inhabitants, first Cato and next Zilpha.

Here, by the corner of my field, still nearer to town, Zilpha, a colored woman, had her little house, where she spun linen for the townsfolk, making the Walden Woods ring with her shrill singing, for she had a loud and notable voice. At length, in the war of 1812, her dwelling was set on fire by English soldiers, prisoners on parole, when she was away, and her cat and dogs and hens were all burned up together. She led a hard life, and somewhat inhumane. One old frequenter of these woods remembers, that as he passed her house one noon he heard her muttering to herself over her gurgling pot,—"Ye are all bones, bones!" I have seen bricks amid the oak copse there. (XIV, 3)

Like Cato, Zilpha worked to provide for herself, spinning "linen for the townsfolk," and keeping chickens. Nonetheless, her soup was made mostly of bones, and her life was hard, "inhumane" even. Her house and livelihood were destroyed by presumably white arsonists. And now, in Thoreau's time, all that is left is some bricks amid the oak copse, a ruin among the plants that grow around it.

Next, Thoreau describes Zilpha's brother Brister and his wife Fenda.

Down the road, on the right hand, on Brister's Hill, lived Brister Freeman, "a handy Negro," slave of Squire Cummings once,—there where grow still the apple-trees which Brister planted and tended; large old trees now, but their fruit still wild and ciderish to my taste. Not long since I read his epitaph in the old Lincoln burying-ground, a little on one side, near the unmarked graves of some British grenadiers who fell in the retreat from Concord,—where he is styled "Sippio Brister,"—Scipio Africanus he had some title to be called,—"a man of color," as if he were discolored. It also told me, with staring emphasis,

when he died; which was but an indirect way of informing me that he ever lived. With him dwelt Fenda, his hospitable wife, who told fortunes, yet pleasantly,—large, round, and black, blacker than any of the children of night, such a dusky orb as never rose on Concord before or since. (XIV, 4)

Thoreau's description elided two different Bristers: Brister Freeman of Concord, who had lived at Walden, and Brister Sippio of Lincoln whose grave Thoreau had seen.⁴² One thing the two Bristers had in common was the burden of their blackness. Though Brister Freeman owned the land he lived on in Walden, it was eventually harassed away from him.⁴³

⁴² Henry David Thoreau, *Walden: A Fully Annotated Edition*, ed. Jeffery S. Cramer (New Haven, US: Yale University Press, 2004), 249n20.

⁴³ Elise Virginia Lemire, *Black Walden: Slavery and Its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 160–71. The story of one attack is told with chilling nonchalance in the memoir of Peter Wheeler in *The Centennial of the Social Circle in Concord: March 21, 1882* (Riverside Press, 1882), 140–41.

Mr. Wheeler once had a most ferocious bull to kill. He and his men succeeded with some difficulty in getting the animal into his slaughter-house. They were afraid, however, to go in and encounter his fury, and, while outside conferring upon the safest mode of proceeding, Brister Freeman, the celebrated negro, happened along. Wheeler, giving his men the wink, inquired very affectionately after Brister's health, and told him if he would go into the slaughter-house and get an axe, he should have a little job to do. Brister never suspected mischief, at once opened the door and walked in, when it was quietly shut upon him, and the appalled negro found himself face to face with the enraged bull. It was already a "case of fight or die," and after sundry minuets about the house, the celerity of which would have established even a French dancing-master, Brister fortunately spied the axe he had been sent in for, and, seizing it, commenced belaboring his adversary, giving him a blow here and there as he had opportunity. All this while stood Peter and his men watching through the dry knot-holes the valiant exploits of Brister, and cheering him on with the most encouraging roars of laughter. Fortune at length decided in favor of the negro; he laid the bull dead upon the floor, and casting down his weapon of fight, came forth unharmed. But imagine the amazement of his tormentors when at length he emerged, no longer the dim, sombre negro he was when he entered, but literally white with terror, and what was once his wool, standing up straight like so many pokers, they could hardly persuade themselves to believe it was Brister; but without waiting for them to identify him, or receive their congratulations for the notable manner in which he had sustained himself, the affrighted and indignant negro turned his back upon them and departed.

Another thing the two Bristers had in common was their name. Cato and Brister's names both carried deep significance. Enslaved people were often given names from ancient history (as Cato had been) or named after places. Brister's name was a common name given to enslaved men in the north, one that carried with it a bitter history. Bristol was England's largest slave port, and "Brister" was a variant of the name of that city.

The former inhabitants, the remains of whose households Thoreau describes, had been part of a small community that had mostly disappeared before Thoreau ever went to the woods. "An Irishman, Hugh Quoil" was the last inhabitant of the woods before Thoreau, and died soon after Thoreau moved to the woods (XIV, 11).

It is not a coincidence that many, though not all, of the inhabitants of the Walden Woods in the generation before Thoreau had been free black people. People were enslaved in Concord from its founding in 1635 until after the Revolution. One contemporary scholar, herself a child of Concord, was motivated to tell the history of Concord slavery by the fact that even after a surge in studies of northern slavery, most books about Concord continued to be "more or less about the town's role as the cradle of liberty and literature," almost never acknowledging that "enslaved men and women helped to build what would become New England's most storied town."⁴⁴

Thoreau's oral histories of Cato, Zilpah (Thoreau's spelling of her name seems to have been a less-common variant), Brister, and Fenda showed a Concord that included black people, but in which their continued presence was usually unwelcome except in continued service to white residents in exchange for room and board. Not all but some freed black people chose to leave lives of service and make their way on their own, to live independently. Because newly freed slaves were usually unable to purchase land, "the abandoned slaves were permitted by their

⁴⁴ Lemire, *Black Walden*, 9.

former owners to squat locally, but only on the most out-of-the-way, infertile places."⁴⁵ Thus, one of the things we know about the former slaves who settled at Walden Pond – among them Cato, Zilpah, Brister and Fenda – was that they refused the new wage economy, in which they would have exchanged labor for wages.

Rather than continuing to live by service to others, these courageous people made the difficult decision to eek out an unsteady and harassed but independent living on the shores of Walden Pond. There they established a community that endured for four decades (between approximately 1782 and 1820) and at its height seems to have included around 15 formerly enslaved black people and some poor white people. Thoreau called it a small village. Brister owned his own land for a time, until it was harassed away from him. The place, Brister's Hill just north of Walden Pond, still bears his name. His sister, Zilpah, lived independently for 40 years, a feat matched by no other Concord woman of her time.

Walden Woods was not the only such place. Other sites on the outskirts of Concord had also been home to communities of formerly enslaved people and others who were unwelcome in the village. Many such places, where people who left slavery formed their own communities, have become – like Walden Woods and the site of Negro Fort near Apalachicola – icons of wilderness. As Lemire writes, "The history of slavery and its aftermath reveals that at least some of our nation's cherished green spaces began as black spaces, with Walden Woods a particularly striking case in point."⁴⁶ Lemire doesn't elaborate the point, but two other examples begin to fill out this pattern. Contemporary archeological work in Central Park has investigated a community

⁴⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 12.

there, Seneca Village, that was razed to build the park.⁴⁷ Central Park is now, of course, one of the most famous green spaces in the United States. And the Great Dismal Swamp of Virginia and North Carolina, part of which is now a National Wildlife Refuge, was famous as a refuge for people who left behind slavery and formed new lives for themselves.⁴⁸

Thoreau moved to the Pond twenty-five years after Zilpah's death. He was inspired by the heroism of these 'former inhabitants.' He was drawn for this reason to the neighborhood they had occupied, and they were among the community of spirit he joined while in the woods. Describing the passage on "Former inhabitants," Lemire writes, "Their experiences after emancipation were one reason Thoreau was drawn to live in Walden Woods himself. He regarded the former slaves' persistence in the face of isolation and harassment as heroic, and like them he sought to live independently."⁴⁹ This is one of the main reasons to think that Thoreau was drawn to Walden Woods for social reasons; he sought a community of exemplars. To the extent that he was drawn to Walden Woods by exemplars, this interpretation also complicates Tauber's claim that Thoreau created the following myth: "We each potentially possess the heroic

⁴⁷ Diana diZerega Wall, Nan A. Rothschild, and Cynthia Copeland, "Seneca Village and Little Africa: Two African American Communities in Antebellum New York City," *Historical Archaeology* 42, no. 1 (2008): 97–107.

⁴⁸ Thoreau probably alluded to this when he wrote in "Walking": "When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable, and, to the citizen, most dismal swamp. I enter a swamp as a sacred place,—a *sanctum sanctorum*." It would have also been an allusion to Longfellow's 1842 poem "The Slave in the Dismal Swamp." Harriet Beecher Stowe went on to set her second novel, published in 1856, in the Great Dismal Swamp: *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*. On the history of formerly enslaved people in the Great Dismal Swamp see Ted Maris-Wolf, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Maroon Life and Labor in Virginia's Dismal Swamp," *Slavery & Abolition* 34, no. 3 (September 1, 2013): 446–64; Daniel O. Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People: The Archaeology of Maroons, Indigenous Americans, and Enslaved Laborers in the Great Dismal Swamp* (Gainesville: Society for Historical Archaeology, 2014).

⁴⁹ Lemire, *Black Walden*, 1.

ability to elevate our respective lives by conscious effort, by deliberate moral choice."⁵⁰ Thoreau did make a choice to join the society he found at Walden Woods. It was a heroic effort to surround himself with the spiritual community that would help elevate him. But he didn't think that he could do it alone. He relied on the community at Walden Woods to elevate his life.

My interpretation of Thoreau's going to Walden to seek society is also supported by the frame Thoreau gives the passage on former inhabitants. It comes directly after one of the most moving images of Thoreau's two years in the woods. He writes that when he got a woodstove in his second winter to replace the fireplace he used in his first, "I felt as if I had lost a companion. You can always see a face in the fire" (XIII, 19). The stove is a better technology, it burns less fuel, but it's also less companionable. Having the fire shut up in the stove, where you cannot see it, doesn't provide the same kind of company as watching the flames would. This passage about the fire is followed immediately by the chapter "Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors." Instead of the fire, Thoreau says, "For human society I was obliged to conjure up the former occupants of these woods" (XIV, 1). I take it that he is not being coy when he calls this conjuring a provision of society. The face in the fire was a real loss; just so, the former inhabitants – like the elderly dame and old settler of "Solitude" – are real company. This impression is deepened in the tenderness with which Thoreau describes the former habitations of the people he has for company on winter nights.

What a sorrowful act must that be, - the covering up of wells! coincident with the opening of wells of tears. These cellar dents, like deserted fox burrows, old holes, are all that is left where once were the stir and bustle of human life and "fate, free-will, foreknowledge absolute," in some form and dialect or other were by turns discussed. But

⁵⁰ Alfred I. Tauber, *Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 9.

all I can learn of their conclusions amounts to just this, that "Cato and Brister pulled wool;" which is about as edifying as the history of more famous schools of philosophy.
(XIV, 12)

Here, Thoreau expresses intense sympathy with the loss of the community that had existed before him. He expresses respect for its inhabitants, who were philosophers surely. And he expresses regret about the problem Lemire came to confront in writing about the former slaves of Concord – the historical sources on the community at Walden Woods are so thin (though not as thin as most books about Concord would make you think). All of this suggests Thoreau's love for those former inhabitants whose homes welcomed his visits with lilacs, even if they were gone.

Concord lore in Thoreau's time was that the spirits of these people, particularly Zilpah, still occupied the woods. In *Walden* Thoreau receives visitors "thought to be dead" and "invisible to most persons" more than once. In our time, not everyone believes that the spirits of the dead live on among us, but to de-people them from the pages of history is a mistake. The spirits of Cato, Zilpah, Brister and Fenda, along with the other members of Walden Woods' society – human and animal, vegetable and mineral – were Thoreau's social community and best teachers. Thoreau's insistence that the others in the woods have social standing is part of what I mean by his "nature piety."

conclusion

This chapter has argued that rather than departing from society when he went to Walden, Thoreau was invested in a neighborhood while he lived at the woods. By this I mean that he cultivated relationships with a broad array of creatures and other beings. We get the mistaken impression of his departing society when we make two characteristic mistakes that Thoreau's writing challenges: first when we think of 'the village' as the center of all sociality, and second

when we constrict our understanding of social actors to the particular class to which Thoreau belonged. Thoreau challenges both of these assumptions. First, in response to the view that the village is the center of social life, Thoreau raised a conceptual problem – what we take to be the center of anything depends on where we are and what we take to be important. Second, in response to the view that sociality belonged only to the class of which Thoreau was a part, Thoreau insisted that every being participates in social life: frogs, birds, winds, rains, but also foreigners, outsiders, and even the now-dead. In this way I have argued that Thoreau's life in the woods was a social life. In the next chapter I shall argue that Thoreau's cultivation of the relationships with the other inhabitants of the woods I have described formed the ground for his political activity after he left.

Chapter 2 - Thoreau's Politics

We worship not the Graces, nor the Parcae, but Fashion.

Walden, (I, 38)

This chapter responds most basically to the idea that Thoreau of *Walden* is apolitical. Three decades of scholarship in political theory have been dedicated to showing that Thoreau was not apolitical, and to uncovering what form of politics he advocated, so I need not belabor that point. But that scholarship has tended to focus on what Thoreau wrote about his political views; it has treated him as a theorist of politics. Attention to the form of life Thoreau recommends in *Walden* shows how his theory of politics was caught up in his daily practice. I argue that the choices he made about his daily life, especially the renunciatory ones he describes making in *Walden*, were more closely allied to his politics than we usually remember, and that with them in view we get a different picture of what democratic individualism is than we have received from the theorists of political liberalism.

There is good reason that most of the scholarship on Thoreau's politics in political theory has focused on his political essays and on Thoreau as a theorist of democracy. Those essays, especially "Civil Disobedience," were, after all, the sources in which his view of politics was most legibly expressed. My own view is that *Walden* shows an important feature of his politics that is often glossed over in analyses that focus on the political essays. His political life was deeply integrated into his personal, daily practice and piety. And it was his time at *Walden* that convinced him that the changes required by the transformation of economy he sought would not only be good for the slave, and good for the worker, but also good for the ones who took up

laboring. This also means that Thoreau's political life, in which he expressed views on political issues of his day and participated in abolitionist activities, was connected to his religious life.

This chapter focuses on his politics. The next two will focus on his religion.

I first discuss some contemporary political theory of democratic individualism and the reasons that it has focused on interpreting Thoreau's politics as a theory, rather than a practice.

In order to support the argument that Thoreau's politics was as invested in practice as it was in theory, I explain the way in which keeping Thoreau's interest in the slave history of Concord in mind should change our understanding of his choice for voluntary poverty.

Then I focus on one important example of the integration of Thoreau's practices, his political ideals, and his political interventions. The example is his interest in clothing and textiles. In *Walden* Thoreau suggests that you should wear your clothes until they wear out. It sometimes sounds like simple miserliness, or mere resistance to the tyranny of fashion. Thoreau does want to resist the tyranny of fashion, but his concern about clothing is linked, as I show in this chapter, to two of the political issues that Thoreau cared most about.

Thoreau's most famous political commitment was to the abolition of slavery, and his participation in abolitionism has been well-documented. But slavery was not Thoreau's only concern with the political economy of his period. While most Northern abolitionists (and, I should say, many historians of white abolitionism) looked with rather self-satisfied eyes upon the developing industrial economy of the North, comparing it favorably to the slave economy of the South, Thoreau took the rather uncommon position that neither was just: neither the slave labor that supported the South's economy, nor the wage labor that supported the North's.

Thoreau's time in the woods went beyond the social relationships he cultivated there. His life in the woods had a further aim, which was justice for the community within and beyond his social community. People sometimes think that Thoreau did his own work while he lived at the pond merely as an end in itself, that he was apolitical. He certainly did try to provide for himself, to live independently; but he did this for importantly contextual reasons. Thoreau thought self-reliance was a good, but he did not treat it as his only end. He was a seeker of spiritual community, and his efforts to live self-reliantly were his pursuit of the perfection of that society of spirit. One important component of a perfected society of spirit, in his view, would be justice, which obtains when each member of a community receives what they are due, when we distribute rightly all the goods there are, physical, social, and spiritual.

Thoreau tried to give up what he could not get for himself partly because he wanted to find an alternative to common ways of life that required the unjust labor of others. He also thought the results of this experiment in "free labor" might serve as an example to encourage other people that abandoning economies of unjust labor would be good for us. It persuaded him that abolition was not only the right thing to do, but also that it would be good for everyone. After Thoreau's time in Walden Woods he wrote much more vigorously against slavery than he had before.

While some interpreters see tension between *Walden's* retreat and Thoreau's more politically explicit writing, I read them together. When we read *Walden* in the context of Concord, we see how the book is both about communion with what Thoreau called "nature" and at the same time an instantiation of his politics. For Thoreau, ethical relations to the material world, on the one hand, and to humans, on the other, are inextricably bound. In this sense, "free labor" in *Walden* is

both part of Thoreau's personal religious practice and at the same time political resistance against forces promoting unjust labor, both in the North and in the South.

political theorists

There is movement across the disciplines for understanding Thoreau as a political actor, but unfortunately for the most part there is not much research that crosses these disciplines, even when the subject is Thoreau's politics. For example, the recent 2012 collection of essays on *Thoreau's Importance for Philosophy*, though many of its essays discuss Thoreau's politics, never mentions the 2009 collection *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau*.⁵¹ On the one hand, this is understandable given the disciplinary requirements of philosophy and political theory. On the other hand, one essay in the volume, by Paul Friedrich of University of Chicago's Committee for Social Thought, argues against viewing Thoreau as apolitical on the basis of his activism, without acknowledging the strong efforts in this direction by political theorists.⁵²

The discussion in political theory, where the past thirty years have seen a growing insistence that Thoreau was a political thinker, is now about what sort of politics Thoreau endorses. George Kateb interprets Thoreau as a liberal. For Kateb, individualism is an anchoring value for democracy, and the Emersonians (Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau) are its geniuses. They wrote the richest works we have on this specific form of democratic individualism. He also thinks that

⁵¹ Rick Anthony Furtak, Jonathan Ellsworth, and James D. Reid, eds., *Thoreau's Importance for Philosophy* (Bronx, NY, USA: Fordham University Press, 2012); Jack Turner, ed., *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009).

⁵² Paul Friedrich, "The Impact of Thoreau's Political Activism," in *Thoreau's Importance for Philosophy*, ed. Rick Anthony Furtak, Jonathan Ellsworth, and James D. Reid (Bronx, NY, USA: Fordham University Press, 2012), 218–22, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/alltitles/docDetail.action?docID=10594296>.

individualism without democracy (in Kantianism and English and German romanticism) is incomplete.⁵³ Thus, he prefers the Emersonians as the geniuses of democratic individualism.

For Kateb and other political theorists, individualism does not mean selfishness. It means respect for the individual as individual. It means that individual persons are of utmost value, and that individual human life is a value we should protect. There is nothing wrong with this, as far as it goes. But the political theorists go too far (and miss one of the central features of *Walden*) when their concept of individualism obscures the basic relationality and interdependence of human life.

Jack Turner's *Awakening to Race* builds off of Kateb's democratic individualism. Where Kateb views the Emersonians as the last generation of individualist genius, Turner finds their heirs in African American intellectuals of the twentieth century: Douglass, Ellison, and Baldwin. According to Turner, each adds a missing element to the individualism articulated by Emerson and Thoreau (Turner does not focus on Whitman) that brings it more in line with what is required to face contemporary struggles over the place of race in American democracy.

The book sets up the debate over the meaning of race as an agency/structure dilemma, in which advocates of personal responsibility and self-reliance face off against those who see historical injustice and structural racism as barriers to just communal life. Turner's aim is to articulate a form of self-reliance, of democratic individualism, that incorporates the concerns of those who see structural injustice as a central problem in American life. I admire this work. Turner argues that Emerson and Thoreau viewed complicity as the opposite of self-reliance, and therefore that the establishment of justice for all is a precondition for any citizen's self-reliance. In addition to Emerson and Thoreau's "nonexploitation obligation," Douglass, Ellison, and

⁵³ George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1994), 78.

Baldwin show that a "democratic egalitarian obligation" is integral to self-reliance. This entails four features of self-reliance that Emerson and Thoreau failed to articulate. "(1) socioeconomic realism, (2) sensitivity to dialectics of identity and difference, (3) historical consciousness, and (4) appreciation of relinquishment as a virtuous act."⁵⁴

Awakening to Race has one of the finest, most inspiring descriptions of the democratic individualist.

Democratic individualist character blends playfulness with moral seriousness. The democratic individualist will often interact in an agonistic fashion. But the expansion and flourishing of his character will respect others' moral equality. In the eyes of the democratic individualist, freedom and adventure are finer when constrained by the rights of others. *Domination and exploitation indebt the individual to those he dominates and exploits – making his achievements less commendable and his life less his own.*

Achieving personal power on terms of justice and equality, refusing to elevate oneself through the degradation of others, is hard and therefore sweet. The democratic individualist welcomes the challenge fair play imposes.⁵⁵

Who would not want to endorse such person, who aims for justice and equality over against domination and exploitation? I am agreed with Turner that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere, as the saying goes, but the way he puts the point raises an important question. Why should debt in itself should make an achievement less commendable and a life less one's own? The answer Turner gives, that self-reliance requires that I make my life my own, implies that in order to avoid exploitation and domination I ought not indebt myself to others. It implies that democratic individualists are not dependent on others. But in general we

⁵⁴ Jack Turner, *Awakening to Race: Individualism and Social Consciousness in America* (Chicago ; London: University Of Chicago Press, 2012), 115.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 8.

acknowledge that no person can achieve all wholly on his own. We are inclined to cooperation, and in any case we cannot do it all. We will necessarily indebt ourselves to one another. One thing that goes wrong in exploitation and domination is that the dominator or exploiter fails to acknowledge and offer due piety to the actual relationships in which he finds himself. It seems strange to characterize the opposite of this as "welcoming the challenge fair play imposes," as though what is good about justice is that it is hard for *me*, rather than that it achieves right relation between *us*.

In addition, domination and exploitation do not simply indebt the individual to those he dominates and exploits. They cause a moral harm that is greater than debt, that is, a moral harm that cannot be repaid. A debt is something owed. But a dominator and an exploiter does not simply owe justice. He has also caused a harm that cannot be repaid.

Turner's chapter on Baldwin is where he develops the idea of relinquishment as a virtue, and there it is in the context of the reconstitution of the nation. Turner's radical idea is that everyone would have to give up and then everyone would also get. The funny thing is that Turner uses Baldwin here, admitting that Baldwin never really said anything very explicit about relinquishment. But *Walden* is largely about relinquishment, in part because abolition had to be about relinquishment. The idea is that when we have unjust rights, what should we do? The answer applies to slavery, and to white supremacy, and to consumerism. We should give them up. Those things never really belonged to us anyway, we never had a justifiable claim to them, so it's capitulation even to call it relinquishment, in a way. Turner writes, "most provocatively, the surrender of safety would require at least the partial surrender of a vested right to property – that is, of a right to goods beyond what one needs to lead a life of equal freedom."⁵⁶ Thoreau himself not only was intent on relinquishment for himself, but was also convinced that no one else had

⁵⁶ Ibid., 101.

the right to some forms of ownership. Not only of slaves, which were obviously unjustly owned in his view, but also of the woods of Concord, where he thought all should be free to dwell. I discuss this further in Chapter Four. Perhaps Turner hopes to present a milder version of the critique of property than the one that Thoreau offered, or one more easily swallowed by the liberal tradition he hopes to reform.

After Turner's thought that self-reliance and complicity are opposites, his most important point is that freedom has material prerequisites. Turner writes that Kateb grounds the state's distribution of goods in an under-theorized right to life, when in fact it is integrally related to the citizen's achievement of self-reliance, because without water and food and shelter and leisure time, a person cannot in fact achieve their freedom. This is all based on Baldwin, however, which I find fascinating, because it seems like you could also find it in Thoreau and to a lesser extent Emerson. "Denying that there are pre-political rights to material good superfluous to one's freedom enables Baldwin to envision a world where people are not 'placed at the mercy of things.'"⁵⁷

I find myself in agreement with Nancy Rosenblum's introductory essay to the edited volume *Thoreau: Political Writings*, especially in her interpretation of Thoreau's views on civil disobedience. He didn't think disobedience was the rule, he thought the comforts of well-governed society were good and that we should be neighborly, "But nothing is more important for democratic individualism and for the possibility of reform than dispelling the belief that day-to-day compliance and the enjoyment of the ordinary advantages of government amount to binding consent."⁵⁸ "The challenge was to rethink political theory of representative democracy, and to reverse what is commonly esteemed good citizenship. *Interpreting individual*

⁵⁷ Ibid., 102.

⁵⁸ Nancy L. Rosenblum, "Introduction," in *Thoreau: Political Writings* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), xxv.

conscientious action as consistent with democracy, indeed as a uniquely fitting expression of democratic individualism, was Thoreau's distinctive contribution to thinking about disobedience and dissent."⁵⁹

She uses the example of democratic elections and the refusal to vote. The authority of a democracy is undermined if citizens refuse to vote. "That is the revolutionary potential latent in representative democracy, and why individual 'disunion' is not just an expression of private conscience but an assertion of democratic individualism."⁶⁰ Here she pushes back against the Arendt view that actions motivated by conscience are unpolitical. I am not clear what she means by an assertion of democratic individualism. She seems to take it for granted as a praiseworthy term. For Thoreau life is not wholly defined by the relationship to government. "The great interest and originality of Thoreau's political thought is precisely the way he situates democratic citizenship in the larger contours of a life well spent."⁶¹

Terrence Wiley's *Angelic Troublemakers* interprets Thoreau in a tradition of religious anarchism. He distinguishes strong anarchism – which supports the abolition of any form of government – from weak anarchism – which insists that no government is authoritative without the consent of the governed. In this sense, Wiley's weak anarchism is difficult to distinguish from radical democracy. Wiley writes, "Thoreau advocates for a government that is probably best described as anarchism as government by consent."⁶² My question in this case is what we get out of describing Thoreau as an anarchist rather than a democrat. "Anarchist opposition to certain

⁵⁹ Ibid., xxvi.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., xxvii.

⁶² A. Terrance Wiley, *Angelic Troublemakers: Religion and Anarchism in America* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 8.

existing political institutions entails denying that those institutions possess legitimate authority."⁶³ "Anarchists reject nonvoluntarist conceptions of *political* obligation."⁶⁴

Rejecting non-voluntarist conceptions of political obligations is a jargon way of describing the thing that Turner, Rosenblum, and Wiley are all describing here. On this view, just government can only obtain with the consent of the governed. Thoreau is most famous for it with respect to the state, not acknowledging obligations to the state. He also thought it about property. I wonder – what sort of obligations did Thoreau think were cast upon us whether we chose them or not? These I suppose he would have called moral obligations. But here, there is a distinction between political obligations, which can only be voluntarist, and moral obligations, which are the same whether you will them or not. Maybe the point is that Thoreau derides what he sees as a commonplace idea there is a politics or an economics that is not moral. He usually uses the words in the sense he is rejecting. Which explains why he rejects 'politics.'

I do not think any of these descriptions of Thoreau's politics is complete, because they are overly concerned with Thoreau as a political theorist. On my understanding, Thoreau's asceticism *is* his politics. In this sense I align most closely with Rosenblum's description of his political life as part of the rest of his life, except that I think all of this should be considered part of his political life. Where Thoreau's liberal defenders maintain that Thoreau's private conscience motivated him to his public politics, the Thoreau I aim to uncover in *Walden* did not hold such a distinction between his private life and his public acts, precisely because such a distinction relies on a realm of life outside relation, in private. There is no such realm for humans. Thoreau thought that his own free labor was among the political reforms he could make, so he set about

⁶³ Ibid., 3. One question here is about what this means, if it is true, for environmental ethics and for climate change. What happens when the only institutions with the authority to help the situation are institutions without legitimate authority?

⁶⁴ Ibid.

trying it. His activity was the basis for what he wrote (his writing was an activity) and his activity always remained primary in his mind. We forget he died without knowing what he would become for us.

civil disobedience

The political theorists are of course right to focus attention on Thoreau's political essays, and especially on the essay now known as "Civil Disobedience." The essay was published under the title "Resistance to Civil Government" in 1849, in a collection edited by Elizabeth Palmer Peabody called *Aesthetic Papers*, and has had enduring influence on American politics.⁶⁵ It considered, in its way, one of the main issues facing – and dividing – abolitionists of the period: the question of whether forcible resistance was ever justified, either by injustice or aggression.⁶⁶

Garrison upheld the view that force was never justified and insisted that abolitionism and pacifism could be held together. In "Resistance to Civil Government" Thoreau answered the question by refusing it. Instead, he argued that conscience should inspire citizens to resist unjust government in which they were complicit by breaking the law. If the injustice "is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn" (CD, 18). The problem was that too many people who *claimed* to be against war and slavery continued to support a government that waged

⁶⁵ This may be an opportune place to point out the distinction between 'ascetic' and 'aesthetic,' which struck me as not worth mentioning until the similarity in pronunciation of these words raised an intriguing discussion at a public lecture, where we all thought we were talking about the same thing for ages. Why is that? My instinct is that the confusion arises because both words refer to form – in the ascetic case to a form of life focused on the good, and in the aesthetic case to forms of beauty.

⁶⁶ On "Civil Disobedience" as a response to 'non-resistance' – or abolitionist pacifism – see Richardson, *Henry Thoreau*, 176.

war and justified slavery. "Practically speaking, the opponents to a reform in Massachusetts are not a hundred thousand politicians at the South, but a hundred thousand merchants and farmers here, who are more interested in commerce and agriculture than they are in humanity, and are not prepared to do justice to the slave and to Mexico, *cost what it may*" (CD, 10). Thoreau insisted that what made a good man good was his willingness to pay the price for doing right. Such men were rare. "There are nine hundred and ninety-nine patrons of virtue to one virtuous man" (CD, 10).

Another reason interpreters tend to focus analysis of Thoreau's politics on "Resistance to Civil Government" is that it turned Thoreau into a political figure for the twentieth century. The essay was given new life in politics when it confirmed for Gandhi the ideas he was working out in his own thinking about what he came to call *satyagraha*. Thoreau had been inspired toward his own view by Indian literature and philosophy, and Gandhi was able to take from Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" (as he knew the title) the idea that individual conscience should stand between an unjust government and the injustices that it perpetrates. But the story of "Civil Disobedience" did not stop there.

Gandhi's movement for Indian home rule at the outset of the twentieth century became itself an example in America during the 1960s, when Martin Luther King, Jr. took "the Gandhian method of nonviolent resistance" as the method for enacting "the Christian doctrine of love."⁶⁷ For King, the method of nonviolence just was "Thoreau's and Gandhi's civil disobedience," as he wrote in the *New York Times Magazine* on September 10, 1961.

The force and importance of Thoreau's essay, then, is not only what it did in its own period. It has also, through Gandhi and King, become an icon of resistance to injustice around the world.

⁶⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 150.

The essay's topic is the conscience of the citizen as a motivation for resistance to government, and it takes as its central example the night that Thoreau spent in Concord's jail for refusing to pay the poll tax. That story is told also in *Walden*, briefly, but it is given its most vivid articulation in this essay and used as an illustration of the resistance that Thoreau takes to be required of citizens whose consciences conflict with the government to which they are apparently subject.⁶⁸ In Thoreau's case, the refusal to pay the tax was inspired by the feeling that doing so constituted collusion with a government that supported the enslavement of human persons and that waged imperial war against Mexico, both grave injustices. What we now call the Revolutionary War, Thoreau called "the Revolution of '75" and he suggested that the revolution was *less* justified than the resistance to slavery and wars of conquest he was presently promoting. This was strong rhetoric. He wrote that he would likely not have participated himself in the Revolution of '75.

All men recognize the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist, the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable. But almost all say that such is not the case now. But such was the case, they think, in the Revolution of '75. 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 their friction; and

⁶⁸ The account as told in *Walden*, in the chapter on Thoreau's outings to the village: "One afternoon, near the end of the first summer, when I went to the village to get a shoe from the cobbler's, 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." (VIII, 3) Here, the justification for resistance does not refer to consent, but rather to the unjust treatment of men, women, and children.

possibly this does enough good to counterbalance the evil. At any rate, it is a great evil to make a stir about it.

Here, Thoreau describes the instigation of the Revolution of '75 as the taxation of "certain foreign commodities." He suggests that he would not have supported such a revolution, because those commodities are ones that he could do without, and avoid paying the tax that way. Then, he begins a confusing analogy when he writes, "All machines have their friction." The machine may be the government, the taxes the friction. Or, the machine may be the unjust taxes, and Thoreau's refusal to pay them the friction. "At any rate," to "make a stir about" such a case, in which you can avoid the tax through abstemiousness, "is a great evil." Then he makes the case that the present resistance is *more* urgent than the Revolution had been.

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. In other words, when a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize. What makes the duty the more urgent is the fact, that the country so overrun is not our own, but ours is the invading army. (CD, 8)

Thoreau argues that the present case is decidedly different from that of the Revolution of '75. The urgency is partly due to the fact that the country being overrun by a foreign army is not *ours*, but is in fact *theirs*. In the Revolution of '75 the colonists resisted another army; now it's *our* army that is doing the robbery. Thoreau ignores the fact that the colonists' complaint was that the power exercised through arbitrary taxation was the moral equivalent of slavery. He thinks that unlike then, when there was friction in the machine, now, it is not just friction in the machine,

but a whole machine of friction, a machine whose sole purpose is friction: "oppression" in the case of slavery and "robbery" in the case of the war with Mexico.

The machine against which citizens were obliged to act as a counter friction, the machine that was a friction machine, good for nothing else, was a metaphor, in "Resistance to Civil Government." But, like the illustration of resistance in his own night spent in prison, the imagery of machinery was not abstract to Thoreau.

For Thoreau chattel slavery was not the only pressing local labor issue. Thoreau was an abolitionist, aided people on the run from slavery, and participated in abolitionist politics.⁶⁹ He hosted the antislavery society's annual meeting in commemoration of West Indian Emancipation at his house at Walden Pond in the summer of 1846. But he also thought that too often abolitionists told a self-satisfied story about the North, locating the problem in the faraway South. As he wrote in "Resistance to Civil Government," "I quarrel not with far-off foes, but with those who, near at home, co-operate with, and do the bidding of, these far away, and without whom the latter would be harmless" (CD, 10). Where most Republicans of the North, including the most prominent white abolitionists, promoted "free labor" as the alternative to slave labor, Thoreau implied that the only "free" labor was that at which you are employed by yourself, and by doing so took a jab at the regnant political ideology of the North. In this sense, his retreat to the woods to do the labor his own life required was the instantiation of his central political ideal.

⁶⁹ One important primary source about Thoreau's assistance to runaways, beyond Thoreau's own writings, is Edward Waldo Emerson, "Interview with Ann Bigelow (Transcribed from the Manuscript Notes of His 1892 Interview)," Concord Free Public Library, accessed December 6, 2016, <http://con5635.verio.com/collect/antislavery/68.html>.

His critique of Northern economy is strongest in "Economy," the first chapter of *Walden*, and in my reading Northern economy is the problem to which the whole of the rest of the book responds. So here I take a closer look at his own interest in voluntary poverty, especially with respect to clothes, and through the example of clothing his interest in the factories of Concord, and his response to the developing industrial economy of the North.

political significance of concord slavery

Lemire's research offers important context for Thoreau's practices of simplicity by describing the uses of slavery by white people in the generation before Thoreau. *Black Walden* tells the story not only of Concord's former slaves and their lives in the woods, but also of the men who were the owners of those slaves and, under political pressure from the slaves themselves during the revolution, granted them freedom. John Cuming was the former owner of Brister Freeman, and "He and the town's other gentlemen residents were afforded the time to practice their professions and rule the town's and eventually the nation's civic affairs by the slaves, servants, and hired hands who did the necessary work of raising food for their owners."⁷⁰ In this context, Thoreau's insistence on doing his own work and on the simplification of his personal economic affairs takes on a different, less cranky, hue. Thoreau's pursuit was not only to do his own work because it would build his character, though he did seem to think that it would. It was also a necessary part of disentangling himself from systems that relied on the unjust labor of others. Doing the work his own life required was also his pursuing the good of others.

This comes through most clearly in the critique of philanthropy at the end of "Economy," where Thoreau begins by acknowledging that some people will see his retreat to the woods as selfish and asocial in the sense discussed in Chapter One. "But all this is very selfish, I have

⁷⁰ Lemire, *Black Walden*, 12.

heard some of my townsmen say" (I, 102). In reply, Thoreau suggests that philanthropy often works against its own aims. He says that he would not want anyone else coming to do him good. And at the end of this long critique of philanthropy, he says that the philanthropist himself needs healing.

I believe that what so saddens the reformer is not his sympathy with his fellows in distress, but, though he be the holiest son of God, is his private ail...If you should ever be betrayed into any of these philanthropies, do not let your left hand know what your right hand does, for it is not worth knowing. Rescue the drowning and tie your shoe-strings.

Take your time, and set about some free labor. (I, 109)

I discuss the critique of philanthropy at greater length in Chapter Three, but the two most important things about this passage at the moment are that Thoreau suggests philanthropy is caused by a deeper illness and that his cure for it is free labor, that is, labor that withdraws from the unjust economies that require philanthropy in the first place.

In this context, each person's responsibility is to heal himself from the deeper illness and to free himself from reliance on the unjust use of any other's labor; or, if he is the one providing unjust labor, to stop, as those formerly enslaved inhabitants at Walden Woods had done. In the grandest vision of this effort, it means not only doing the work your own life requires, but also making the way you do the work worthy of your highest aims. Accomplishing this requires the simplicity that Thoreau preached.

To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts. Every man is tasked to make his life, even in the details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour....Still we live meanly, like ants;...Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his

ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb nail. (II, 15-17)

Thoreau's famous call to "simplicity, simplicity, simplicity" is a spiritual pursuit by which Thoreau aims to heal his "private ail." But it is also, as we can see in the context of the slavery to which the former inhabitants of Walden Woods had been subject, resistance against injustice. Elite households in the generation before Thoreau had relied on the labor of enslaved people. *Black Walden* tells the story of Brister Freeman's former owner, John Cumings. John was well-educated and owned land, which made him eligible in principle to join Concord's elite. He was married in 1753 to Abigail Wesson. In order to enable John to join Concord's elite, which would require both status and time away from household labor, Abigail's father gave him Brister as a slave. This wedding gift enabled John to achieve his gentlemanly ambitions. With Brister growing the family's food and harvesting its fuel, John was free to practice medicine, become a military officer, and otherwise join the ranks of gentlemen. In this context, Thoreau's admonition to simplify is not only a pursuit to clear your mind for contemplation; it is also and as importantly a refusal of standard class politics that rely on unjust labor. In this sense, the simplicity of Thoreau's life in the woods is an act against slavery and the social stratification it supported.

clothing, the factories, and abolitionist politics

The beginning of *Walden* outlines how Thoreau aimed to live on as little as possible during his time in the woods – to learn what were the "true necessities of life," the most moderate forms of clothing, shelter, and food he could get by on. The practices of simplicity that Thoreau took up in the woods sought to overcome anxiety by recentering his life on its most basic elements. As

represented in the book, these practices are wide-ranging, both negative and positive, active and contemplative. They include moderation in clothing, shelter, and food. They also include hospitality, housework and other labor, bathing, reading, writing, sitting, rowing, fishing, looking, walking, flute-playing, keeping appointments with trees, gossiping, visiting neighbors, and bean-hoeing. All of these practices play a role in Thoreau's form of life, and he hoped that through them he might transform himself.

I will just take one of Thoreau's practices as an example: clothing. Thoreau wrote that one way he pursued simplicity was by wearing simple clothes. He thought simple clothing – like simple shelter and simple food – was good for him because it conduced to a life of less "anxiety and strain" (I, 15). He wrote,

It is desirable that a man be clad so simply that he can lay his hands on himself in the dark, and that he live in all respects so compactly and preparedly that, if an enemy take the town, he can, like the old philosopher, walk out the gate empty-handed without anxiety. (I, 37)

The old philosopher in this passage is accustomed to dressing so simply that when he wakes in the night and has to flee, he is already wearing the clothes he needs to bring with him.

In Thoreau's practices of simplicity, including his insistence on simple clothing, he aimed at personal formation. His asceticism sought to cultivate a life for himself like that of the old philosopher "without anxiety."

But Thoreau's asceticism was also *political*, by which I mean it was aimed not only at his individual formation but also at the radical transformation of the world in which he lived, specifically of emerging industrial capitalism.

Thoreau wrote, about why he preferred simple clothes,

I cannot believe that our factory system is the best mode by which men may get clothing. The condition of the operatives is becoming every day more like that of the English; and it cannot be wondered at, since, as far as I have heard or observed, the principal object is, not that mankind may be well and honestly clad, but, unquestionably, that corporations may be enriched. (I, 41)

While Thoreau thought that simple clothes would help him live a life of true philosophy, he also had a political reason to prefer simplicity on this count. Life for the mill workers who produced clothing in the period was deteriorating. Thoreau worried that the expanding industrial economy of the north took corporate profit as its central aim rather than providing honest goods, and that it did not offer employees fair conditions.

Though Thoreau doesn't discuss them at length, there were good reasons that the conditions of the operatives would have been on his mind. Textile mills in Lowell, Massachusetts, about 15 miles up the Concord River from Concord, were on the route Thoreau and his brother John travelled in 1839 on a river trip that Thoreau wrote about in his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. In the five years before John and Henry's river trip, those factories in Lowell were the sites of some of the first labor organizing among industrial textile workers in the U.S. The young women who worked in the factories staged "turn outs" or strikes in 1834 and 1836, in an effort to oppose the reduction of their wages. And in 1844, the year before Thoreau moved to his house in Walden Woods, the women workers at Lowell formed a labor reform association, the first U.S. union of women workers. They lobbied to limit the work day to ten hours.

This context suggests that Thoreau's reticence for new clothes was not *merely* oriented toward his own formation. This practice was also aimed at envisioning a radical alternative to the economy of the period, an economy which – Thoreau thought – exploited poor workers.

Thoreau's mention of the conditions of the women who worked in the factories was not taken merely from what reading he may have done in contemporary newspapers. As with many of the subjects about which he wrote, his observations were made first in intricate, mostly nonjudgmental detail, in his journal. On January 2, 1851 Thoreau wrote in his journal a long passage about a visit he had made to "the Gingham mills" "at Clinton." There, he saw a single room "which covers 1 7/8 acres & contains 578 looms."⁷¹ The tone of the passage is strikingly matter-of-fact, and seems in the voice of one who had more curiosity than worry about the mills. Perhaps one who saw that industrialism would be impossible to stop through acts of resistance.

He describes the process from start to finish as he saw it at the mill: the preparation of the raw cotton, the spinning of the thread, the dyeing of the thread, the setting up of the warp, and the weaving of the woof. Then, the quality control: the girls who pick off "inequalities or nubs," the machine that singes off "the fuz," the washing, the drying, the starching, the finishing of the edges, the measuring, folding, and packing. Through all of this, he exhibits the same tone of report that he came to adopt in his observations of the natural world.

Take, for an example of his observational tone, this passage, about the treatment of the raw cotton before its spinning into thread. "The cotton should possess a long staple & be clean & free from seed. The sea-island cotton has a long staple and is valuable for thread. Many bales are thoroughly mixed to make the goods of one quality– The cotton is then torn to pieces & thoroughly lightened up by cylinders armed with hooks & by fans. Then spread a certain weight

⁷¹ Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Journal, Volume 3: 1848-1851*, ed. Robert Sattelmeyer, Mark R. Patterson, and William Rossi (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1991), 170.

on a square yard—& matted together & torn up & matted together again two or 3 times over."⁷²

The process is what seems to interest him, how all the parts fit together.

The agent, "Forbes," who he presumably met at the mill, said that that mill was "the best Gingham mill in this country—the goods are better than the imported— The English have even stolen their name Lancaster mills calling theirs 'Lancasterian.'" This passage suggests that Thoreau's line about "everyday becoming more and more like the English" is not merely a throwaway line; he had evidence that suggested that the American mills were like the English in quality, and probably suspected that they were like them in conditions, too.

The journal entry goes on to articulate Thoreau's interest in conducting further research on the mills, especially by visiting "The Coach lace mill—only place in this country where it is made by machinery—made of thread of different materials—as cotton—worsted—linnen—as well as colors—the raised figure produced by needles inserted woof fashion. Well worth examining further."⁷³

The one time in the long passage on his visit to the mill that Thoreau adopts a tone that suggests more than mere observation comes at the very end of the passage, where he praises the quality of the work. "I am struck by the fact that no work has been shirked when a piece of cloth is produced, every thread has been counted in the finest web—it has not been matted together."⁷⁴

We might expect his interest here to lie with the new machines, especially after he mentions in the preceding paragraph the name of the inventor "of what is new in the above machinery."

Instead he closes the passage with praise of the operator's virtue: "the operator has succeeded only by patience perseverance and fidelity."⁷⁵ This suggests, I think, that though Thoreau took

⁷² Ibid., 171.

⁷³ Ibid., 172.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 172–73.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 173.

great interest in the mechanical processes adopted in the mills, he attributed the value of the work in the end to those workers who operated the machines.

Thoreau's ascetic politics of clothing was not cut off from wider political discourse, but was an intervention into political debates of the period, in particular among abolitionists.

Thoreau thought the enslavement of black people was an affront to justice, he aligned himself with those who opposed it, and he worked actively for its abolition, but in his critique of the economy of the North he also dissented from some of the most famous proponents of abolitionism. The controversy was over whether to analogize conditions of northern workers to those of southern slaves. The labor activism of the women in the factories at Lowell – the operatives to whom Thoreau may have referred when he wrote about the factory system – sometimes analogized their plight with slavery. Songs they sang during strikes said, for example, "I cannot be a slave."⁷⁶ They were part of a broader labor movement in which wage-workers resisted their unjust subjection to the power and will of employers.

But abolitionists like Wendell Phillips and William Lloyd Garrison refused the analogy between southern slavery and wage labor. Garrison wrote that the term 'wages slavery,' was an "abuse of language." And that "we cannot see that it is wrong to give or receive wages."⁷⁷ Abolitionists had good reasons to insist on a sharp distinction between wage labor in the developing industrial north and slave labor in the south. Laborers in the north may have been paid poorly and subject to terrible conditions, but they were party to a voluntary contract, and

⁷⁶ Quoted in Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 98.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War*, Reprint edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), xxiii. The quotation is from *The Liberator*, "Chattel Slavery and Wages Slavery," October 1, 1847. See also Marcus Cunliffe, *Chattel Slavery and Wage Slavery: The Anglo-American Context, 1830-1860* (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 1979).

thus (in one sense) free to leave their work. In addition, some abolitionists felt that the comparison of wage labor to slave labor would undermine the argument against the enslavement of black people. In their view, abolitionism's moral urgency meant it had to be prioritized, and the sharp distinction between slave labor and wage labor upheld.

Labor activists in the north thought that the abolitionist emphasis on southern slavery to the neglect of labor reform at home stank of hypocrisy. George Henry Evans, the editor of the National Reform Association's publication *Young America*, promoted the view that landless employees were unfree because dependent on employers, and that only land reform in the form of redistribution would create a just economy.⁷⁸

Thoreau refused the standard abolitionist contrast between wage labor and southern slavery, and sided with the labor activists about the problems of wage labor while also going beyond them in what is one of *Walden's* most easily misunderstood passages. Thoreau wrote,

I sometimes wonder that we can be so frivolous, I may almost say, as to attend to the gross but somewhat foreign form of servitude called Negro Slavery, there are so many keen and subtle masters that enslave both North and South. It is hard to have a Southern overseer; it is worse to have a Northern one; but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself. (I, 8)

Thoreau agreed with Garrison: "It is hard to have a Southern overseer." But then he also agreed with the labor activists: "it is worse to have a Northern one." And finally he insisted that worse than either of these subjections was "when you are the slave-driver of yourself." The passage might offend us, in its dismissiveness of actual slavery. How could Thoreau say that a northern

⁷⁸ For details on the dispute and on the voluntaristic conception of freedom that underlies abolitionists' objections to labor activists use of the term 'wages slavery' see Alex Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 41–46.

overseer was worse than a southern one? Or that any form of self-rebuke was worse than actual oppression? It should shock us. It was likely intended to shock Thoreau's audiences. Thoreau lectured from the manuscript of *Walden* about 12 times in the four years between 1848 and 1852, and it's likely many of these lectures were taken mostly from "Economy." Many in his audiences would have been largely sympathetic to abolitionism, some of them would have been invested in labor reform. The abolitionists would have been opposed to comparing the factory system to slavery, the labor reformers would not have known what to make of the claim that you could be a slave-driver of yourself.

But Thoreau's claim that having a northern overseer is worse than having a southern one is, I think, his response to abolitionists like Garrison who viewed northern industrial capitalism as the economic alternative to slavery. Thoreau was not so sanguine about industrialism. He wanted to hold together the critique of slavery with the critique of wage labor and to fight for a politics that would seek a radically different economy for both the south and the north. Such a politics rested most basically on a freedom that could only be achieved by the renunciation of slave-driving of every kind, including of the self, a freedom achieved through political asceticism.

Through the limited example of Thoreau's restraint with respect to clothes, I have tried to show that Thoreau's asceticism was invested in a radical politics against industrial capitalism. I also suggested that his ascetic politics of clothing was not cut off from the wider political context but was responsive to political debates among abolitionists, especially about what a desirable economy would look like.

Recall the "Former Inhabitants" of Walden Woods discussed in Chapter One, Concord's formerly enslaved black men and women who, upon gaining freedom around the time of the

American revolution made their way as they could in the woods. In the awkward transition from slavery to freedom, when many former slaves understandably chose lives very similar to the ones they lived under slavery, a few courageous people made the difficult decision to seek out an unsteady and harassed but independent living on the shores of Walden Pond.

In moving to the woods, these people left behind *both* the slavery to which they had previously been subject *and* the wage labor many blacks in the north – without inheritable wealth in land for farming or capital for trade – transitioned to upon gaining freedom. Thoreau moved to the Pond twenty-five years after Zilpah's death. He was inspired by the heroism of the former inhabitants. He was drawn for this reason to the neighborhood they had occupied.

I interpret Thoreau's *Walden* as taking these people as inspiration to a form of economy that no one had yet imagined – an economy that would submit neither to the domination of slavery nor to the exploitation of industrial capitalism.

conclusion

In *Walden*, Thoreau was concerned that people may think the way of life that relies on unjust labor is bad but nonetheless unavoidable.

When we honestly 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. (I, 10)

To this despair in the face of the sort of radical change in the economic system that would be required by our giving up the things we get on the backs of other people's labor, Thoreau replies, "It is never too late to give up our prejudices" (I, 10). He not only wants to show himself that his experiment in living simply is possible. The main point of *Walden* as I see it is to show its reader

that they too can disentangle themselves from systems of unjust labor. Thoreau was "trying to hear what was in the wind, to hear and carry it express!" (I, 26).

I think this interpretation of *Walden* as the evidence required to truly believe that a way of life was possible without slavery can also help us understand Thoreau's increased political activity against slavery after his time at Walden, as his time there, living simply, gave him evidence to think that the kind of life required by the end of slavery would be both possible and good. All of Thoreau's central political commitments – his abolitionism, his anti industrialism, and his anti imperialism – are married to his commitment to the form of society he developed in the woods and that I sought to describe in Chapter One. That society in the woods was one that aimed to justly recognize every member. Whether bird or enslaved man on the run or oxen or bean or pauper or poet or railroad man, in the Walden Woods of Thoreau's experiment, you were at home. In the generation before his, the place had been home to those who, for whatever reason, had to squat on land that was not their own. Thoreau thought such society should be normative. After his experiment, Thoreau was convinced that slavery is a great evil, that the factory system was unjust, and that citizens should not support war-making for the purpose of territorial expansion, which he called – frankly – robbery.

To conclude, the political theorists, even when they do attend to *Walden*, tend for understandable reasons to focus on the more blatantly political bits, and less on the parts that are characteristic of the book, the passages that describe Thoreau's piety for the natural world, his time in the woods, and his work on the land. But the fact that they have done so has sometimes obscured the tight relationship between Thoreau's capacious understanding of the society in the woods, his piety toward that community, and his insistence on justice for all. Thoreau's insistence on renunciation of affairs sometimes looks like cranky asceticism, or the asociality

people seem to have attributed to him even in his own time. But when we read *Walden* in the context of Concord's slave history and developing industrial present, which is the context in which he wrote it after all, when we contrast Thoreau's thumbnail accounts with those of John Cuming – slave owner of a previous generation – we see that for Thoreau, simplicity is not only self-cultivation. With it, Thoreau resisted both slavery and exploitative industrialism. Thoreau's account of his life in the woods is not simply a description and commendation of religious asceticism for the sake of religious virtue. Thoreau also thought the results of his experiment in what he called "free labor" could serve as an example, as a way to persuade others – who he worried faced political despair and hopelessness – that renouncing slave-driving of all kinds and abandoning present economies would be not only good for our world and good for our fellows, but also good for us.

Chapter 3 - Thoreau Against Philanthropy

Chapters 3 and 4 argue that Thoreau's sociality and politics, as described in chapters 1 and 2, are part of something broader, a tradition of thinking and doing and living – a religion you might say – that Thoreau received through diverse sources and that, through Thoreau, had diverse impacts after him. (This dissertation focuses on Thoreau's articulation of this form of life. I am planning a second book about the reception of this part of Thoreau's thought among twentieth-century authors and political activists.) Chapter 3 articulates Thoreau's theological critique of the practice of philanthropy, which was commonly considered by his neighbors the appropriate Christian response to the poor. He condemns it, on theological grounds, and his condemnation of it is the motivation for the rest of *Walden*.

Chapter 4 shows what Thoreau thought was the alternative to philanthropy, which he spent the rest of *Walden* articulating. I call this Thoreau's 'asceticism,' which like 'religion' names an ad hoc collection of diverse world traditions that have been clustered together under a single category, a process often associated with Christian empire and usually taking Christian tradition as the implicit normative paradigm. I claim attention to Thoreau's asceticism is important to interpreting Thoreau's religious life. Interpreting him this way goes some distance in understanding why he is sometimes read as asocial and apolitical, because asceticism has often withdrawn from broader social and political forms, and is thus easily mistaken as world-rejecting, which is to say denying normal human connection to family, to work, to food, to politics, and any other so-called worldly goods.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ In his last, posthumous work, Max Weber described "world-rejecting asceticism" in the following terms: "a formal withdrawal from the 'world': from social and psychological ties with the family, from the possession of worldly goods, and from political, economic, artistic, and erotic activities — in short, from all creaturely interests. One with such an attitude may regard

The present chapter argues that while Thoreau's critique of philanthropy in "Economy" is clearly motivated by his social and political commitments as described in Chapters One and Two, a close reading of the section demonstrates essential theological reasons for the critique.

philanthropy

Thoreau's ferocious critique of philanthropy begins with the recitation of a charge he had apparently heard against his experiment at Walden, and what appears to be a confession to the charge. "But all this is very selfish, I have heard some of my townsmen say. I confess that I have hitherto indulged very little in philanthropic enterprises" (I, 102). It thus begins by giving the impression of an apology for his own unwillingness to participate in charity, to "undertake the support of some poor family in the town," which is what the townsmen in question seem to have thought he should do. But, you notice, the confession does not match the accusation. The accusation is of selfishness; the confession is that he has not indulged in philanthropic enterprises. This disjuncture sets up the ten-paragraph ending of "Economy," in which Thoreau argues there is a difference between being good and doing philanthropy. Philanthropy is, on Thoreau's telling, an indulgence. It does not turn out looking very good.

any participation in these affairs as an acceptance of the world, leading to alienation from god." He contrasted it with "inner-worldly asceticism" in which "the world is presented to the religious virtuoso as his responsibility. He may have the obligation to transform the world in accordance with his ascetic ideals, in which case the ascetic will become a rational reformer or revolutionary on the basis of a theory of natural rights." Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 542. This second form of asceticism Weber associated closely with the Protestant ethic. The last chapter of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* was titled "Asceticism and the Spirit of Capitalism." Weber's contrast between world-rejecting and inner-worldly asceticism underplays the way that even the most so-called world-rejecting ascetics continue to participate in alternative forms of politics, economics, art, and erotic practice, forms that usually cannot help but impact the forms that the ascetic has rejected.

A shift begins, already at the end of the first paragraph, and the apology becomes ironic.

"When I have thought to indulge myself in this respect, and lay their Heaven under an obligation by maintaining certain poor persons in all respects as comfortably as I maintain myself, and have even ventured so far as to make them the offer, they have one and all unhesitatingly preferred to remain poor." Coming as it does at the end of "Economy" the reader has in mind here the meager style of life that Thoreau has just described – his own attempts to live on as little as possible in terms of clothing, shelter, and food. The implication is that his offer to "certain poor persons" was refused because what was on offer was not better than what they already had. The further implication is that the townsmen who are so enthusiastic about "Doing-good," are giving something that does not have value.

Indeed, what 'good' is becomes a main point of contention in the second paragraph, where Thoreau makes clear that his own view of what is good is rather different from that of the neighbors he has in mind. In the first two occurrences of 'good' in that paragraph, its meaning is in question. "At doing something,—I will not engage that my neighbors shall pronounce it good,—I do not hesitate to say that I should be a capital fellow to hire; but what that is, it is for my employer to find out. What *good* I do, in the common sense of that word, must be aside from my main path" (I, 103). The first of these two sentences is quite confusing, with a subordinate clause inside dashes breaking up the significance of the sentence as a whole. But the impression it gives is that Thoreau expects to do things, things he doubts his neighbors will call good, but that whether they are good or not "it is for my employer to find out." 'Good' according to his neighbors is not necessarily good. Given Thoreau's insistence on independence, it is very difficult to imagine that the 'employer' he has in mind would be one who offered him wages for labor. It may be that it refers to himself. But I think the best reading is that it is a tongue and

cheek reference to God's judgment. Thoreau's neighbors won't pronounce his doings good, but he insists that what his doings are "is for my employer to find out," that is, a judgment reserved for God.

Next, Thoreau suggests that it is better to try to become good than to try to do good. The next sentence follows from the idea that what is good is a judgment reserved for God. "What *good* I do, in the common sense of that word, must be aside from my main path, and for the most part wholly unintended." Though Thoreau refrains from pronouncing his doings good, he nonetheless continues doing, and there may be some good in those doings, even if unintended. It is not that Thoreau avoids doing good. Rather, he finds the way people take for granted what is good disturbing. They think they know. "Men say, Begin where you are and such as you are, without aiming mainly to become of more worth, and with kindness aforethought go about doing good. If I were to preach at all in this strain, I should say rather, Set about being good" (I, 103). Going about doing good is an activity that worries Thoreau. He suggests that 'being good' would be a better thing to aim at. What the difference consists in is not clear in this passage, but this sentence is followed by a reference to Phaeton, the son of the sun in Greek mythology.

When Phaeton, wishing to prove his heavenly birth by his beneficence, had the sun's chariot but one day, and drove out of the beaten track, he burned several blocks of houses in the lower streets of heaven and scorched the surface of the earth, and dried up every spring, and made the great desert of Sahara, till at length Jupiter hurled him headlong to the earth with a thunderbolt, and the sun, through grief at his death, did not shine for a year. (I, 103)

Thoreau does not spell out the moral of the story. The implication seems to be that Phaeton's wish to prove his beneficence leads to destruction on a grand scale. That is to say, whereas at the

beginning of the paragraph Thoreau registered doubt that what his neighbors pronounce good is actually good, at the end of the paragraph he suggests that the attempt to do good causes harm.

Thoreau does not spell out the difference between doing good and being good, but I think it likely that the difference is in what the actions are that are inspired by these two aims. Thoreau's concern is that ethical life is not the doing of a certain set of prescribed good deeds. Ethics is relational, the working out together of what our relationship and our world ought to be like. Someone who *does* good without thinking about whether he is good enforces his view of the good on the recipients of his charity, which is an act of arbitrary power. Someone who *is* good can do good, but only unintentionally, through the working out of his relationships.

Thoreau writes that being the recipient of philanthropy is suffocating, and best avoided.

If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life, as from that dry and parching wind of the African deserts called the simoom, which fills the mouth and nose and ears and eyes with dust till you are suffocated, for fear that I should get some of his good done to me,—some of its virus mingled with my blood. No,—in this case I would rather suffer evil the natural way. (I, 104)

This passage is strange, because it makes the man into a natural event, and then says that he would rather suffer evil the natural way, which leaves me confused about which is the natural way.

The example Thoreau offers of what evil can come of the attempt to do good is a vivid one. In the following paragraph he takes an image of Jesuits burning Indians at the stake. Thoreau says the Jesuits "were quite balked" when the Indians being burned "suggested new modes of torture to their tormentors." The paragraph is strange, but its last clause suggests that the Indians

were more Christian than the missionaries: "the law to do as you would be done by fell with less persuasiveness on the ears of those, who, for their part, did not care how they were done by, who loved their enemies after a new fashion, and came very near freely forgiving them all they did" (I, 104). In this example, the missionaries tried to do what they thought was good for the Indians, to share the gospel. But the gospel, "the law to do as you would be done by," did not persuade them – Thoreau suggests because they were spiritually superior. The missionaries burned them at the stake, and in that a great evil came of their attempt to do good.

Even aside from the tragic case of the missions to the Indians, one of the dangers of a philanthropy based on doing good—good according to the philanthropist—is that do-gooders do not always have the clearest sense of what aid the poor most need. "We make curious mistakes sometimes" (I, 106). When we make judgments about the needs of others without consulting them, we are liable to get it wrong. Thoreau writes, "Often the poor man is not so cold and hungry as he is dirty and ragged and gross." Where the philanthropist would assume that the poor are cold and hungry, and try to provide for those needs, Thoreau says the philanthropist's taste may be what makes him think that, rather than the actual needs of the poor. I think, in this sentence, Thoreau is not describing "the poor man" as "dirty and ragged and gross" in his own voice. I think he is setting up a contrast for the philanthropist, who takes the dress of the poor man to indicate that he is cold and hungry, when in fact, it is just the way that man sees fit to dress. "It is partly his taste, and not merely his misfortune" (I, 106). Where the philanthropist sees misfortune, he should look more carefully at whether his is simply seeing a different fashion.

Thoreau provides an example of a mistake he made in his judgments about what another person needed, in an instance in which he himself took the dress of another to indicate his misery.

I was wont to pity the clumsy Irish laborers who cut ice on the pond, in such mean and ragged clothes, while I shivered in my more tidy and somewhat more fashionable garments, till, one bitter cold day, one who had slipped into the water came to my house to warm him, and I saw him strip off three pairs of pants and two pairs of stockings ere he got down to the skin, though they were dirty and ragged enough, it is true, and that he could afford to refuse the *extra* garments which I offered him, he had so many *intra* ones. This ducking was the very thing he needed. Then I began to pity myself, and I saw that it would be a greater charity to bestow on me a flannel shirt than a whole slop-shop on him.

(I, 106)

The example is an everyday one. Thoreau found himself pitying the workers he saw laboring on the frozen pond, because their clothes were ragged. When he had the chance to interact with one of these laborers, who he welcomed into his home to get warm, he offered the man what his pity suggested the man needed. But the man refused the clothes Thoreau thought the man needed, and for good reason; the man's clothes were sufficient to the job. Thoreau's pity did not match the man's actual needs. In fact, Thoreau could have done less shivering himself in clothes more like those of the man he pitied. The most effective charity, in the circumstance, would have been for someone else to give Thoreau a warmer shirt.

The everyday example of how we easily misperceive the needs of others has a deeper, troubling significance with respect to what philanthropists are doing when they provide for the needs they think the poor have. If it is the case that the philanthropist just wants everyone to have

the goods that he, the philanthropist, values, then philanthropy is the enforcement of a set of values that may not be (likely are not) shared. The philanthropist may never find out. This seems a paltry pastime.

And, furthermore, if philanthropy acts to enforce the fashions cherished by the philanthropist, then it neglects the evil that people actually suffer. It does not even aim at true problems.

Thoreau wrote, "There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root" (I, 106). The philanthropist is so busy making sure that everyone gets to enjoy the things he likes that he ignores the reason he is the philanthropist and they are the poor to begin with.

Indeed, Thoreau thought it likely that those with money to give away in philanthropic enterprises had likely been a cause of the problems any philanthropy they "indulged in" would aim to ameliorate. He wrote, "it may be that he who bestows the largest amount of time and money on the needy is doing the most by his mode of life to produce that misery which he strives in vain to relieve." He went on to use a striking analogy. "It is the pious slave-breeder devoting the proceeds of every tenth slave to buy a Sunday's liberty for the rest" (I, 106). 'Slave-breeder' is, of course, a polite term for one who perpetrated sexual violence upon enslaved people and then sold their children. Readers who shared Thoreau's abolitionist leanings would have recognized and rejected the hypocrisy of "the pious slave-breeder." Thoreau's point was that the capitalist's philanthropy wasn't much better than the slave-breeder's hypocrisy.

What would be better than philanthropy, in Thoreau's account, is justice. "I would not subtract any thing from the praise that is due to philanthropy, but merely demand justice for all who by their lives and works are a blessing to mankind" (I, 108). The sentence is complicated. In the context of the analogy to slave-breeding, Thoreau's admitting the "praise that is due to philanthropy" is a rather sarcastic concession. Having already established that philanthropy is

like the slave-breeder's giving Sundays off by selling an enslaved person's child, what praise could possibly be due to philanthropy? Only the negative sort these final paragraphs of economy render. "Justice" just means a relationship set right, in which each gives and receives according to what is due, and thus establishes jointly a good shared between them: right relation. The second half of the sentence demands for all what Thoreau has already given the philanthropist. Where the philanthropist has likely exploited the poor and stolen from society at large to obtain the excess wealth he gives, "those who by their lives and work are a blessing to mankind" are the opposite of the philanthropist, in that their lives and work give true good, bless the community to which they belong. To demand justice for them is to say that they are due something they have not yet received. But their due will not likely be a form of praise. They, the truly good, do not seek praise and rarely even know they offer blessing: "His goodness must not be a partial and transitory act, but a constant superfluity, which costs him nothing and of which he is unconscious."

What ultimately motivates Thoreau to denounce philanthropy, however, is not its practical failures, its difficulty identifying and treating true problems, or its papering over of the exploitation on which wealth is so often built. The main issue, and the one with which Thoreau closes the ten-paragraph critique of philanthropy, is spiritual.

In paragraphs seven and eight Thoreau diagnoses the philanthropist's motivation. "If any thing ail a man, so that he does not perform his functions, if he have a pain in his bowels even,—for that is the seat of sympathy,—he forthwith sets about reforming—the world" (I, 108). The philanthropist, or the reformer who Thoreau figures in a similar way, is motivated by his own ailing. And rather than identifying the pain as coming from a problem within himself, and

reforming—his diet, he "sets about reforming—the world." The dash represents comic timing. The sentence is supposed to be funny; audiences who heard Thoreau lecture apparently did find him hilarious. A review of Thoreau's lecture on "Economy" to the Salem Lyceum in November 1848 (an early version of *Walden* material) reported that the lecture was done in "a strain of exquisite humor, with a strong undercurrent of delicate satire against the follies of the times." Thoreau kept "the audience in almost constant mirth."⁸⁰ Emerson wrote in a letter of 1850 about one of Thoreau's Concord lectures on material from *Cape Cod*: the audience "laughed till they cried."⁸¹

But Thoreau's story of the reformer with a bellyache is not a mere joke. The passage goes on from "he forthwith sets about reforming—the world."

Being a microcosm of himself, he discovers, and it is a true discovery, and he is the man to make it,—that the world has been eating green apples; to his eyes, in fact, the globe itself is a great green apple, which there is danger awful to think of that the children of men will nibble before it is ripe; and straightaway his drastic philanthropy seeks out the Esquimaux and the Patagonian, and embraces the populous Indian and Chinese villages; and thus, by a few years of philanthropic activity, the powers in the mean while using him for their own needs, no doubt, he cures himself of his dyspepsia, the globe acquires a faint blush on one or both of its cheeks, as if it were beginning to be ripe, and life loses its crudity and is once more sweet and wholesome to live. (I, 108)

On this telling, philanthropy is not a response to the needs of the world, but rather to the needs of the philanthropist. The philanthropist sees the whole world as "a microcosm of himself," and in

⁸⁰ "Salem Lyceum," *Salem Observer*, November 25, 1848. See also David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 500.

⁸¹ Kent P. Ljungquist, "Lectures and the Lyceum Movement," in *The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*, ed. Joel Myerson, Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, and Laura Dassow Walls (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 339.

his egomania, he even mistakes his own eating green apples (which caused the bellyache to begin with) for the world's having done it. Then he sets off around the world to make sure "the Esquimaux and the Patagonian," and "the populous Indian and Chinese villages" will not eat green apples. Never mind if they do not have any. In "a few years of philanthropic activity," "he cures himself of his dyspepsia." After he cures himself through philanthropy, "life loses its crudity and is once more sweet and wholesome to live." The condemnation is that the reformer has to save the world to save himself, when both he and the world would be better off if he saved himself first. "The philanthropist too often surrounds mankind with the remembrance of his own cast-off griefs as an atmosphere, and calls it sympathy. We should impart our courage, and not our disease" (I, 108). All of *Walden*, with its appeal to realizing morning, is aimed at addressing the despair that Thoreau worries motivates the philanthropist, and that he senses is a temptation to many, even himself.

The basic problem is that seeing the world as the microcosm of our own problems is a spiritual failure, and Thoreau's motivation for the critique of philanthropy, and I think for the whole of *Walden*, is religious. In paragraphs nine and ten, Thoreau stakes his theological claim against the "drastic philanthropy" of the reformer. Paragraph nine begins, "Our manners have been corrupted by communication with the saints. Our hymn-books resound with a melodious cursing of God and enduring him forever. One would say that even the prophets and redeemers had rather consoled the fears than confirmed the hopes of man" (I, 110). This is a critique of the contemporary church on theological grounds. Thoreau takes exception to the portrayal of God in the hymns he cites. "There is nowhere recorded a simple and irrepressible satisfaction with the gift of life, any memorable praise of God" (I, 110). Thoreau's religiosity requires first and foremost satisfaction with the gift of life and praise of God that follows. "There is nowhere

recorded..." is an overstatement. Thoreau's engagement with scripture demonstrates that he found the imagery of the Psalms did offer memorable praise of God. But the point is that philanthropy failed most basically on a spiritual plane, by spreading the disease of despair. And what was wrong with this was that it neglected the most basic religious duty of praise.

The place wherein God's gift of life was most obvious to Thoreau was, as he wrote, "Nature." And thus his response to the spiritual shortcoming of the philanthropy of the period was there. "Let us first be as simple and well as Nature ourselves, dispel the clouds which hang over our own brows, and take up a little life into our pores. Do not stay to be an overseer of the poor, but endeavor to become one of the worthies of the world" (I, 110). In likening the philanthropists of the North to overseers of the poor, Thoreau again analogized conditions in the North to southern slavery. Then, in case there was any doubt about the claim Thoreau was staking, the final paragraph of "Economy" quoted a story from the *Gulistan*, a Sufi poem among those Thoreau was referring when he wrote about the race of philosophers, including Persians.

I read in the *Gulistan*, or Flower Garden, of Sheik Sadi of Shiraz, that 'They asked a wise man, saying: Of the many celebrated trees which the Most High God has created lofty and umbrageous, they call none *azad*, or free, excepting the cypress, which bears no fruit; what mystery is there in this? He replied; Each has its appropriate produce, and appointed season, during the continuance of which it is fresh and blooming, and during their absence dry and withered; to neither of which states is the cypress exposed, being always flourishing; and of this nature are the *azads*, or religious independents.—Fix not thy heart on that which is transitory; for the *Dijlah*, or *Tigris*, will continue to flow through Bagdad after the race of caliphs is extinct: if the hand has plenty, be liberal as the date tree; but if it affords nothing to give away, be an *azad*, or free man, like the cypress. (I, 111)

The story explains why the cypress, which bears no fruit, is called free, or azad. The answer is that rather than suffering seasons of blossoming and withering, the cypress always flourishes. Like the cypress, the religious independents (also called azad) flourish always, never fruiting and never withering, and never with anything to give. This is the religious alternative to philanthropy – to embrace poverty and become a "free man, like the cypress."

I find this account of philanthropy both accurate and in many places frustrating. I think it says something true about what motivates many people to do-gooding, which is the need to feel that they are helping others as a balm for their own guilt and despair. And I believe when unexamined this need has led many to harm. But I also have a feeling that Thoreau is too hard on the instinct to help. Isn't there something good about wanting to help one another? Even if we shouldn't force our vision of care onto another, shouldn't we cherish generosity?

I suppose one issue with this complaint against him is that it is an exaggeration to say that he thinks wanting to help is a problem. "If you should ever be betrayed into any of these philanthropies, do not let your left hand know what your right hand does, for it is not worth knowing. Rescue the drowning and tie your shoe-strings. Take your time and set about some free labor" (I, 109). This, I take it, is one of the mottos of *Walden* as a whole, in which Thoreau aims to pursue reform by other means. At the moment, I am interested in the admonition, "Rescue the drowning," because it suggests there are some helping activities that are important, and even good. And it implies a distinction between the activities of philanthropy and the activity of rescuing the drowning. (An obvious instance of Thoreau giving help is the situation in which he welcomes the Irish worker who was just dunked in the pond to warm himself in Thoreau's house. Rescue the drowning.)

What is the difference to Thoreau between philanthropy and rescuing the drowning? Is it a matter of motivation? Much of what Thoreau denounces in these pages is the self-satisfaction of philanthropic enterprises. Perhaps the problem with philanthropy is that it makes a show of charity. This is also a theological claim. When Thoreau writes "do not let your left hand know what your right hand does," he echoes a biblical injunction about charity. The line comes from the gospel of Matthew 6:1-4, during the middle of the three-chapter Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says,

Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore when thou doest *thine* alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.⁸²

The giving of alms is supposed to be so secret that your left hand does not know when your right hand gives. This teaching suggests that doing good should be neither a show enacted for "glory of men" nor to persuade myself that I am good.⁸³

This biblical echo may explain Thoreau's disdain of philanthropy but support for rescuing the drowning. Philanthropy sounds a trumpet before it, and seeks the glory of men. The form of charity that Thoreau thinks we ought to offer one another is quieter. In paragraph seven, Thoreau writes, of the form of goodness he values, "His goodness must not be a partial and transitory act,

⁸² Biblical citations are to the King James Version, since Thoreau knew it best.

⁸³ This, in addition to the danger associated with record-keeping about illegal activities, could go some way to explaining why Thoreau seems to have written a lot less about helping enslaved people on the run than he did about, say, huckleberrying.

but a constant superfluity, which costs him nothing and of which he is unconscious" (I, 108).

This is why becoming good rather than doing good is the aim that Thoreau endorses. Only someone who *is* good can do good in this quiet way.

But there are other features of the critique of philanthropy that are troubling, in particular ones that make Thoreau seem self-important, or simply callous. One passage occurs in paragraph three, right after the analogy to the windstorm. Thoreau suggests that philanthropy's focus on some over others sets him against it.

Philanthropy is not love for one's fellow-man in the broadest sense. Howard was no doubt an exceedingly kind and worthy man in his way, and has his reward; but, comparatively speaking, what are a hundred Howards to *us*, if their philanthropy do not help *us* in our best estate, when we are most worthy to be helped? I never heard of a philanthropic meeting in which it was sincerely proposed to do any good to me, or the like of me. (I, 104)

John Howard was a prison reformer who worked to ameliorate conditions for prisoners in Britain in the eighteenth century. Thoreau seems to take exception to the fact that philanthropists like Howard focus their efforts to do good on other people besides people like Thoreau, that they do not love broadly enough. The evidence for this is that they never help him out. "I never heard of a philanthropic meeting in which it was sincerely proposed to do any good to me, or the like of me." This can read as selfish. No one can love abstractly. We always love particulars. Howard loves the prisoner. Thoreau looks pouty when he complains philanthropists don't help him.

He must have known, however, that the passage could be read this way, and used to charge him (again) with selfishness. Why would he have written ammunition for those townsmen he addressed just a few paragraphs earlier, the ones who he has heard say that "all this is very

selfish"? These paragraphs are not a confession to the charge. They try to explain why a person who cares about justice would act as Thoreau does.

So consider another alternative, that the townsmen's understanding of selfishness itself is a mistake at which the critique of philanthropy takes aim. In this case, the problem with philanthropists is not that they do not help Thoreau specifically, but that they have a false picture of who doing-good does good for. They assume that what makes an act good is pure altruism, a complete renunciation of egotism. On this picture, one I think Thoreau means to contest, altruism and egotism are the only options. Actions are either motivated by the good of another or by one's own good. The philanthropist endorses those actions I aim at another's good, and condemns those I aim at my own good. The philanthropist does his philanthropy because he means to help another, selflessly, and in so-doing win the title "good." Anyone who acts to his own good is "selfish."

But most truly good things, and especially the goods with which justice is concerned, are not the sorts of things that belong either to you or to me. The things we value most are goods held in common, that can only be held between us. Right relation is among the most important of these things. When my relation to you is right, that is a good that redounds to both of us. When I am unjustly related to you, that harms both of us. The Thoreau of Walden Woods – who cherished relation to the woods, and his neighbors, and the now-dead former inhabitants – was preoccupied with these sorts of goods, common goods. The philanthropist's altruism fails to acknowledge the good of which he himself is deprived by the injustices in which he is implicated. And he fails to account for the good he would receive should those relationships be set right. When Thoreau writes, "I never heard of a philanthropic meeting in which it was sincerely proposed to do any good to me, or the like of me," he may write this not because he feels jilted by Concord's

charitable societies, but because the picture is wrong when it leaves out the good of either party to a relationship. "Love for one's fellowman in the broadest sense" must include the good of *all*, including the supposedly needy *and* the philanthropist.

Another passage makes Thoreau seem grabby, but is probably further reason to think that Thoreau wants to undermine the selfishness-altruism dichotomy he sees playing out in other philanthropic efforts. In the previous passage he complained that philanthropists don't help people like him. But in this second passage he seems to resent that people who do receive help from philanthropists like it because it helps them. In paragraph six, Thoreau seems to condemn a man for praising someone who was kind to him.

Philanthropy is almost the only virtue which is sufficiently appreciated by mankind. Nay, it is greatly overrated; and it is our selfishness which overrates it. A robust poor man, one sunny day here in Concord, praised a fellow-townsmen to me, because, as he said, he was kind to the poor; meaning himself. (I, 107)

Thoreau seems to take exception to the robust poor man's valuing the townsman's generosity to the poor. He implies that it is the man's own selfishness that overrates it. But again, why should Thoreau criticize generosity, or the appreciation of generosity, especially when in the previous passage he complained that the philanthropists did not want to help *him*? I think the answer must be that Thoreau means to undermine the moral picture that suggests actions are either motivated by selfishness or by altruism. Philanthropists *and* the recipients of their charity err when they assume that doing good means delivering kindness, unidirectionally, to the poor. Doing good, Thoreau insists, is something entirely different.

The "Complemental Verses" at the end of "Economy" (authored by Thomas Carew) seem to purposefully denigrate the "poor needy wretch" to whom they are addressed and to speak in the voice of an enlightened 'we.' Thoreau titled the poem "The Pretensions of Poverty."

Thou dost presume too much, poor needy wretch,
To claim a station in the firmament,
Because they humble cottage, or thy tub,
Nurses some lazy or pedantic virtue
In the cheap sunshine or by shady springs,
With roots and pot-herbs; where thy right hand,
Tearing those humane passions from the mind,
Upon whose stocks fair blooming virtues flourish,
Degradeth nature, and benumbeth sense,
And, Gorgon-like, turns active men to stone.
We not require the dull society
Of your necessitated temperance,
Or that unnatural stupidity
That knows nor joy nor sorrow; nor your forc'd
Falsely exalted passive fortitude
Above the active. This low abject brood,
That fix their seats in mediocrity,
Become your servile minds; but we advance
Such virtues only as admit excess,
Brave bounteous acts, regal magnificence,

All-seeing prudence, magnanimity
That knows no bound, and that heroic virtue
For which antiquity hath left no name,
But patterns only, such as Hercules,
Achilles, Theseus. Back to thy loath'd cell;
And when thou seest the new enlightened sphere,
Study to know but what those worthies were. (I, 112)

The beginning of the poem evokes the pastoral imagination, in which virtue is won through simple living, in a 'humble cottage' in the shade near a spring. The voice of the poem chastises the 'you' of the poem, the "poor needy wretch," and contrasts it with the 'we' that interrupts, a we that does not to require "the dull society of" the you's "necessitated temperance." Read in one way, with the 'you' identified with some particular poor person, and the 'we' with some class of not poor people, it seems to succumb to the worst stereotypes about poverty: that it makes people stupid and abject, that they are satisfied by mediocrity, and have servile minds. But the poem does not identify the 'you' and the 'we' in this way. It may be that the poem tempts us to the condescension of the philanthropist that Thoreau has just condemned. Another set of subjects could be in play.

Imagine, instead, that the 'you' of the poem is poverty itself, soul-dulling poverty that pretends to virtue. And imagine the 'we' is those *among the poor* who reject "passive fortitude" preached by the life-sucking poverty for a life of action and excessive virtue. You could think of the poem as addressed to the figure of Thoreau that so often annoys people. That is, readers sometimes think of Thoreau as nursing "some lazy or pedantic virtue," virtue that is not real virtue. He presumes too much about what his voluntary poverty can accomplish for his own

goodness. But the poem condemns such a person, and offers him an alternative prescription: "advance such virtues only as admit excess." The charge made at Thoreau succumbs to the emaciated picture of goodness that Thoreau means to contest. The poem is a rebuke to those who think that mere poverty or philanthropy can win them virtue. True good, including justice among us, is something I must care about *for both of us*, and something I cannot do without being good myself, which will help me give what is due to others and receive what is due to me.

what you should do with money

You might admire Thoreau's tirade against philanthropy for its insistence on justice over mere charity but still think that it leaves something important out. What should people who *do* have wealth do *with* that wealth? Thoreau himself did not, in fact, have much to give away, though evidence suggests he was generous with what he had. But it was easy enough for him to condemn charitable activities that consisted largely of giving money; he wasn't rich. There was his family home and business, which gave him advantages of course: the resources most philosophers need – a place to live (in the family home) and a job to work (in the pencil business) when he needed one. But those things did not belong to him when he was writing *Walden*. He always shared them with his family. He could not give them away.

But he would have known some people who did have wealth that was their own. He thought that what they did as charity was a pittance. He wrote, in paragraph five of the critique of philanthropy, "Some show their kindness to the poor by employing them in their kitchens. Would they not be kinder if they employed themselves there?" (I, 106). The kindness of employing yourself in your kitchen is somewhat strange to us, who live in an era where 'job creators' are blessed saints. But it is important to recall that this was a period in which wage labor was only just beginning, and was in fact controversial. The industrial revolution was underway,

which meant that whereas people had once been employed in their own homes, in their own kitchens, growing foods for their families, making things for barter and sale, now, they were being employed for wages in industrial jobs with set hours. Thoreau's own employment was in trades in which you were usually paid by the job, not by the hour, and thus had the freedom to set your own hours and pace. The cultural shift that this entailed was enormous and, Thoreau thought, problematic for his understanding of right labor. Better, he thought, to leave a man (as he would have said) free to pursue his own business than to trap him with wages.

I don't mean to offer an overly romantic picture of life before industry. There were many ways in which it was difficult and dangerous. And I certainly don't want to say that industrialism brought with it only evil. The history of democratic progress, especially with respect to the extension of the franchise far beyond property-owning white men, suggests otherwise. But the social and economic transformation that ensued with the transition of labor out of the household is one we now take for granted, and one which makes this line about the kindness of employing yourself in your own kitchen somewhat difficult to understand.

The context it appeals to and relies on is one entirely outside the economy of wages. The way in which it is kinder to employ yourself in your kitchen, rather than someone else, is that it leaves the person who would have been employed free to pursue some other thing, whether that is employment in his own kitchen or something else; the point is, he gets to decide. When I employ someone in my kitchen, Thoreau thinks I make him subject to my will, which is an unjust relation. For us, this sounds like nonsense. Now, you have to have wages to do anything at all. But I think that is true to the extent that we have been thoroughly conducted out of any forms of subsistence and into a wage economy. Hardly any of us can live, now, without concern for

wages. We would rather be employed than not. We've been persuaded that we will work for a meager wage and be grateful.

Thoreau wrote in a time when the justice of this system as it emerged was under dispute.

Employing yourself in your own kitchen was Thoreau's kind of philanthropy; Thoreau's kind of charity was similarly radical. "You boast of spending a tenth part of your income in charity; may be you should spend the nine tenths so, and done with it" (I, 106). If philanthropists were going to boast, in Thoreau's view, about the money they gave in charity, if they were not going to follow the biblical injunction to not let the left hand know what the right hand is doing, they ought to just give it all away. Doing so would keep the philanthropist out of a position of power over the receiver, and it would prevent the recipient from being at the mercy of the philanthropist. Without giving it all, philanthropists shortchanged society. When the philanthropist gives a tenth, "Society recovers only a tenth part of the property then."

This line condemned the individualist (in the sense of non-relational) picture of society Thoreau meant to undermine, and it also raised complicated associated issues about property and ownership. Thoreau's insistence that life was essentially relational meant that Thoreau was often suspicious of the practice of private property. "Society recovers" suggests that the property given in charity always belonged in some sense to society, and thus that charity is the restoration of communal property to the community. He called again for justice over charity. "Is this [the philanthropist's tithing] owing to the generosity of them in whose possession it is found, or to the remissness of the officers of justice?" The line, in which the 'this' seems to refer back to "spending a tenth part of your income in charity," suggested that the giving a tenth part of your income has two possible interpretations. The first is that you are generous. This was the one the philanthropists adopted. The second interpretation, which Thoreau wanted to raise, is that

because they have been remiss, the officers of justice have left nine tenths of your income with you. True justice would entail giving it all away. Further, it would entail thinking of my ethical responsibilities in terms of, first, acknowledging and, second, righting the relationships in which I live – as the officers of justice ought to have done – rather than asking the question the philanthropists ask: how can I relieve the suffering of another a little by giving away things I don't need?

In calling for the philanthropist to give everything away, Thoreau suggested (though never made quite explicit) that wealth itself was an offense against justice, that it had been stolen from society. As a previous sentence had put the point: "it may be that he who bestows the largest amount of time and money on the needy is doing the most by his mode of life to produce that misery which he strives in vain to relieve" (I, 106). On Thoreau's view, most wealth was earned through exploitation, indeed on his calculus profit could likely *only* be earned through exploitation, and thus the appropriate form of recompense would not be the restitution of a tenth of the income made off of such exploitation, but rather the ceasing of the exploitation in the first place. "I would not subtract anything from the praise that is due to philanthropy, but merely demand justice for all who by their lives and works are a blessing to mankind" (I, 108).

As in Thoreau's advice to not let your left hand know at the end of paragraph six, this recommendation, to give all of your money as charity, has a famous biblical warrant. A rich man came to Jesus and said, as Luke's gospel has it, "Good Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (18:18). The first thing Jesus did was take exception to being called good. Jesus's reason for the objection is that there is only one good, and that is God. Perhaps this is part of the reason for Thoreau's suspicions about philanthropy, that it is called good. Thoreau *says* there that the

problem with philanthropy is that it fails to notice the good. But it seems clear that a failure to notice the good is related to confusion about what the true good is.

Then, Jesus says that the man knows what to do: "Thou knowest the commandments, Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honour they father and thy mother." These were written in the law of Moses and well-known commands of God. The man responds that he has followed the commandments. He says, "All these things I have kept from my youth up." Then Jesus issues a charge that Christians have only very rarely taken up. "Yet thou lackest one thing: sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me." This one sentence, the "one thing" Jesus says the rich man lacks, describes three acts: selling everything, giving the proceeds to the poor, and following Jesus.

Jesus's description of what the man can do to make up for the one thing he lacks constitutes a triumvirate of difficulties, ones that are quite different from the commandments in the law of Moses. The commandments in the law of Moses are commands of God and also socially sanctioned. In the biblical world, it is good for your wife when you do not commit adultery; it is good for your community when you do not kill; it is good for your economy when you do not steal; it is good for your legal system when you do not bear false witness; it is good for your father and mother when you honor them.

The instructions from Jesus, on the other hand, detail actions that are not socially sanctioned, actions that purposefully set you apart from your social and economic community by declaring that old relational models no longer obtain (mother, child, wife, slave, master, etc) and that the new model for relation is children of God and siblings of one another in the kingdom of God. For the rich man, selling everything involves giving up the social position he had in the world in

which his wealth was achieved and mattered. Giving the proceeds to the poor entailed renouncing the security that his wealth had provided. And following Jesus meant leaving the place that he lived, and likely the family that he lived with and found some comfort among. The man's response is thus not too surprising: "he was very sorrowful: for he was very rich."

And when Jesus saw that he was very sorrowful, he said, How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. And they that heard *it* said, Who then can be saved? And he said, The things which are impossible with men are possible with God. Then Peter said, Lo, we have left all and followed thee. And he said unto them, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or parents, or brethren, or wife, or children, for the kingdom of God's sake, Who shall not receive manifold more in this present time, and in the world to come life everlasting.

The three part instructions from Jesus for the rich man do not fit precisely onto but do fit closely with the traditional vows of Christian monastics to obedience, poverty, and chastity. By selling everything, the rich man would renounce his social position in a hierarchy and claim a different social model than the one in which he was at the top; this coincides with the obedience that religious life requires. By giving the money to the poor, the rich man would make his life among the poor; this coincides with the poverty that religious life requires. By following Jesus, the man would leave traditional kinship associations in favor of the community of Jesus's followers; this coincides with the chastity that religious life requires.

Thoreau and Christianity

Having taken Emerson's metaphor for the scholarly life very literally, perhaps more seriously than Emerson himself took it, Thoreau set out to establish his own rule of life. Concord's little intelligentsia, which came to be seen as the finest of American intellectual culture in the period, took from Weimar Germany, and perhaps especially from Goethe, an interest in development of self, *Bildung* in German and self-culture in English. Their mutual interest in the ascetic discipline required for self-culture was in keeping with the mood of the period.⁸⁴ And in Thoreau's case it was at least partly in response to the sense that Christianity was failing at one of its most central callings, which, he wrote in the summer of 1840, was to joy. "The age is resigned. Everywhere it sounds a retreat. and the word has gone forth to fall back on innocence. Christianity only *hopes*. It has hung its harp on the willow and cannot sing a song in a strange land. It has dreamed a sad dream and does not yet welcome the morning with joy."⁸⁵ The passage was full of biblical allusion. First, 'the word has gone forth.' The sentences after the condemnation of Christianity for mere hope are allusions to Psalms 137 and 30.

Psalm 30:5: "For his anger *endureth but* a moment; in his favour *is* life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy *cometh* in the morning." *Walden* was a sustained meditation on the meaning of morning, and it responded to the dejection that the British Romantics had worried about. It is interesting to think about this as a critique of Christianity of the period, specifically on *Christian* grounds. That is to say, when we take one of Christianity's central messages to be good news, joyous news, then if Christianity does not sustain that joy, it needs to be critiqued precisely in order to sustain Christianity. This is one good reason to view Thoreau as invested in Christian reform.

⁸⁴ Richardson, *Henry Thoreau*, 55.

⁸⁵ Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Journal, Volume 1: 1837-1844*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell et al. (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1981), 167.

His evidence for joy comes not from the story of Jesus in this passage, but from the natural world – from the fish, and insects, and frogs that show something particular about what life *is*.

Surely joy is the condition of life. Think of the young fry that leap in ponds—the myriads of insects ushered into being of a summer's evening—the incessant note of the hyla with which the woods ring in the spring. the *non chalance* of the butterfly carrying accident and change painted in a thousand hues upon his wings—or the brook-minnow stemming stoutly the current, the lustre of whose scales worn bright by the attrition is reflected upon the bank.⁸⁶

Thoreau took the doings of such creatures to be evidence for the thing he thought Christianity was failing to offer more than hope of – that life is in some important way joy, that resignation and retreat are not required nor accurate to the world as it is.

The passage had also alluded to Psalm 137, however, which describes the experience of the people of Israel while enslaved in Egypt. It offers an instance in which the joy Thoreau took to be the condition of life is remote.

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us *required of us* mirth, *saying*, sing us *one* of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget *her cunning*. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy. Remember, O Lord, the children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem; who said, Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation thereof. O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed;

⁸⁶ Ibid.

happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us. Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.

They wept when they remembered Zion. The Israelites had hung their harps on the willows, and their captors had asked them to sing songs of Zion. Their question, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" spoke to the connection between the people and God and the land, and the cruelty of the captors asking for songs of joy in the condition of captivity. The final disturbing verse suggests that those who can enact cruelty against the cruel will take pleasure in it.

In alluding to this psalm, Thoreau accuses contemporary Christianity of playing the part of the Israelites, who could not sing songs of Zion in a strange land, even though they are held captive only by their self-slavery.

It is a deep, strange irony that Thoreau was closer to a thoroughly Christian culture than anyone is now, and yet the story we tell about him is that he was not a Christian. I do not have a theological stake in claiming him as a Christian, but I think we miss a big part of the story when we say that he is not a Christian. The main problem with doing so is that it participates in what is essentially an ecclesiological debate over boundaries. I don't have any interest in casting him inside or outside of anything. We know that Thoreau was deeply engaged with Christian sources, mostly by way of allusions, but also sometimes, as in the above condemnation of Christianity for mere hope, by his direct reference. He was at least an engaged critic of contemporary Christianity on Christian terms.

I think most people who have this conversation, over whether Thoreau was a Christian or not, have one of a few typical perspectives. First, there are Christians who want to protect their

understanding of orthodoxy, and therefore say he is not Christian because they are drawing ecclesial boundaries about who is orthodox. They call him a heretic to protect their view of Christianity. Second, there are Christians who want to claim him as Christian. That is, they have a different understanding of orthodoxy from those in the first group, and they want to draw the ecclesial boundaries differently, for theological reasons. Third, there are scholars who claim no stake in ecclesial debates, but take a kind of humanistic pride in figures they see as having turned against the church. They have a stake in a form of humanism that eschews superstition and Christian orthodoxy itself. These scholars tend to ignore the depth of Thoreau's engagement with religious sources, often because they don't know enough about those sources to see it. Or, when they know the allusions are there, they attribute them to history – that is to say, Thoreau's engagement was due to his historical location rather than his personal piety. I'd like to explain myself in a fourth way, among scholars who don't claim a stake in ecclesial debates, but do see Thoreau as so deeply involved in Christian culture that understanding him as a Christian (at least in some sense) is the more accurate than not.

I do not think it is my place as a scholar of religion to lay claim to Thoreau as a Christian for the church. There are plenty of people who may do that, and they are my comrades. I do not have an interest in doing it. But I do have an interest in making my interpretation of him as loyal as I can to the person that he was. There are some senses in which he was a Christian and some others in which he wasn't. The most honest thing to do is to try to understand what both are. When I try to do this, I see him having attended church with his family, having resigned his membership over a specifically theological dispute, and having continued his engagement with the words and ideas (and to the extent that his asceticism was monastic his practices) that came

from Christianity. Given all of this, I think it would be inaccurate to dismiss his Christianity, and that it is far more interesting to try to find out in what it consisted.

He wrote once about himself that he was "a mystic—a transcendentalist—& a natural philosopher to boot."⁸⁷ There have been many studies of what it meant to be a transcendentalist, and what natural philosophy was and became in his practice. But our understanding of what kind of mystic he imagined himself to be is still nascent. Alan Hodder's excellent study *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness* began this work, by insisting on the mystical features of Thoreau's life and work.⁸⁸ But like many studies of mystics, Hodder's account focuses quite narrowly on the ecstasies.

Mysticism studied apart from the ascetic life in which it is so often practiced can give a false impression of its practitioners. We have received images of them rapt in reveries. In fact, these images have stuck even to figures who were adamant religious reformers, specifically of an economic sort. They usually spent a large portion of their days doing manual labor. This has left the impression that Weber made famous, that some ascetics are otherworldly, more focused on their spiritual lives than on the here and now.

The problem with this story is that it imports contemporary assumptions about household economy that would have been completely foreign until the mid-twentieth century, when industrialization reached its peak in Western nations. Before the mechanistic household innovations upon which many contemporary societies have come to rely, there was no such thing as otherworldly in the sense we now have it. Those religious communities that did have money with which to hire out the labor required for their households would have gotten that money from

⁸⁷ Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Journal, Volume 5: 1852-1853*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1997), 469.

⁸⁸ Alan D. Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

the communities in which they lived. Indeed, Teresa's discalced communities were a response against what she and her fellow Carmelites viewed as the excesses of religious life in which the religious community took from the surrounding lay families in order to support its own mystic reveries. Teresa and John were criticized and nearly forced out of the church for saying that religious communities should be economically self-sufficient, that is, that they needed to do the labor their own lives required, rather than living on the charity of the lay community around them.

Like those medieval monastic reform movements, Thoreau's asceticism was not merely mystical. Hodder has admirably shown the extent of Thoreau's religious life, where many interpreters have simply ignored his thinking about religion. But in focusing on the ecstasies to the neglect of the labor, he perpetuates what is a widespread problem in the study of religion, that we cordon off the religious lives of our subjects into a little pen where there are texts and prayerful practice, but those texts and prayerful practices have no bearing on day to day realities, or on economic and political life. Hodder writes,

If a reading of Thoreau's journals convinces us of anything, it is that his 'religiousness' had less to do with what he at any given moment believed and much more to do with what he perceived and felt in the fluctuating ebb and flow of this inward experience.

Religion for him was an affair of the heart, an interior matter—intuitional and sensual, rather than propositional.⁸⁹

Hodder is right, as far as he goes here. Thoreau was far less concerned with propositional religious life than he was with experience. But to say that that experience was inward, that religion was an interior matter, participates in the quarantining of religion to the private and the personal, a realm that the relational Thoreau I am trying to uncover would not have recognized.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 36.

Religion was never so tidy, and when we make it seem like it was, we are merely unearthing our own orthodoxies.

For Thoreau, "religion" was not only interior; it was a category with bearing on the political and economic realities of his time. "Religion" was a feature of human life that need not be associated with any particular tradition. It was the binding that tied people to whatever they were bound – in the best instances to society (in the good sense), to what was "sacred," to "virtue," to "divinity," and to "spirit," but also sometimes to fashion or vice, or just mundane life – in my favorite example to the cultivation of leaven for bread. "Leaven, which some deem the soul of bread, the *spiritus* which fill sits cellular tissue, which is religiously preserved like the vestal fire..." (I, 85). Often, his favorite examples come from Roman religion.

I would that our farmers when they cut down a forest felt some of that awe which the old Romans did when they came to thin, or let in the light to, a consecrated grove (*lucum conlucare*), that is, would believe that it is sacred to some god. The Roman made an expiatory offering, and prayed, Whatever god or goddess thou art to whom this grove is sacred, be propitious to me, my family, and children, etc.

But "Religion" is not associated with Christianity or Hinduism or Roman religion in particular for him, not with "religions." "World religions" was an idea invented after him. Rather "religion" is associated, in the good sense, with moral categories, with virtuous living – reverence, blessing, devotion, holiness, sincerity, humility, faith, truth, simplicity, innocence, worship, piety – and with what is sacred; in the ambivalent sense, with habitual, committed patterns, be they good or bad; and in the bad sense, with our attachment to those things that keep us from the good.

Chapter 4 - Asceticism as Philosophy

When people think of Thoreau as asocial, apolitical, and areligious, they rule out that he might have relevance to some of the most important questions we have. The first two chapters of this dissertation examined Thoreau's sociality and politics in hopes that we might uncover something in them for ourselves.

The third chapter aimed to articulate a piece of Thoreau's religious orientation by focusing on his critique of philanthropy, on what he thought most people mistakenly call 'good.' And it ended by suggesting that the material conditions of Thoreau's religious life in the woods were as important to his religiosity as his mystical experiences. This chapter continues that line of thinking and focuses on the positive form of Thoreau's religious life, on Thoreau's alternative to philanthropy.

Thoreau's response to his critique of philanthropy, I argue, was his religious life as he documents it in *Walden*, which was an expression of what he thought was actually good. I argue that he expressed his religious piety through daily practice, which I call his asceticism. This practice was aimed both at the praise of God he thought Christianity had blasphemously abandoned and at self-formation, at the goal of growing in wisdom and goodness. It also motivated Thoreau's commitment to the social community of Walden Woods and his political commitment to just governance.

The self-formation he pursued through such practices was related to the pursuit of just political community he most famously articulated in "Civil Disobedience" for at least two reasons. The first was that he thought the self was the beginning of politics; you could not do good without being good. And you could not be good without exercise. In this, his view was

completely standard for the period. But the second was that – as in the case of avoiding factory-made clothing – many of the practices themselves were related to labor issues that were among Thoreau's central political concerns. They aimed to enable other people – the ones who would have worked in the factory, grown his food, or collected his wood – to live as he did, free to conduct their labor lives as they pleased.⁹⁰

Thoreau is usually taken to be so religiously eccentric as to be irreligious. As I argued in the previous chapter, this is a mistake. I take theology seriously. I think constructive studies should be openly welcomed in our pluralist field. And I want to make sure that my scholarship reflects the extensive influence theology has had on religious actors. But I also think that the study of religion (and the discipline of theology for that matter) is most interesting when, in treating historical subjects, it defers judgments of orthodoxy and heresy and instead traces the dynamics at play in any particular instantiation of religious life. In Thoreau's religious life, these dynamics are quite complicated.

Thoreau describes his asceticism explicitly especially in the first and last chapters of *Walden*—"Economy" and "Conclusion"—which sometimes read a little like the first self-help book: "I think that we may safely trust a good deal more than we do" (I, 15). But they only make explicit what is elsewhere in the book exemplified. One of the most interesting features of *Walden* is its insistence on recounting not only the theory of his practice, as in the first and last chapters (and perhaps also in "Higher Laws"), but also what the practice looked like while it was ongoing. This is what makes up, as Thoreau calls it in the first line, "the bulk" of book. It's a big book, and one of the things its large format allows is a window into the experiences that Thoreau

⁹⁰ The instinct to manual labor was also not uncommon for the period. Transcendentalist communitarian experiments at Brook Farm and Fruitlands also placed an emphasis on labor.

found in his daily practice of asceticism. Describing the way that time changes when you change your relationship to labor turns out to require a lot of space.

In this chapter I will mostly focus on what Thoreau writes explicitly about his practice in the more didactic parts of *Walden*. The present chapter is structured by themes that arise most clearly in one key paragraph of "Economy" (I, 19). There, Thoreau offers an alternative to what he sees as Concord's citizens' unnecessarily rigorous economic lives, what he calls their practices of "penance" in paragraph 3, and what he characterizes as their self-slavery in paragraph 8. Such lives misjudge their aim, "Men labor under a mistake" in their pursuit of what they think of as necessity but is, actually, luxury (I, 5). Luxuries are "hindrances to the elevation of mankind," which we know, he thinks, by the fact that "the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor" (I, 19). The quintessential example of this for Thoreau is the practice of "The ancient philosophers, Chinese, Hindoo, Persian, and Greek" (I, 19). The alternative they demonstrate from the one he sees around him in Concord is a life of what Thoreau calls "voluntary poverty," whose fruit is wisdom. And anyone who lives thus is a philosopher. "To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust" (I, 19). Such a life fulfills, "to use the words of the catechism, the chief end of man" (I, 10).

So in what follows I aim to describe in greater depth what Thoreau presents as a tenderer asceticism than the one his neighbors practice through 1) his view of the penance his townsmen are doing, 2) the voluntary poverty he promotes in its place, 3) the critique of property that underlies that voluntary poverty, 4) attention to those who Thoreau takes as authorities for this mode of life, 5) what his vision of philosophy is, and 6) the sense in which he takes life to be a vocation – that is, the fulfillment of a calling.

Concord's penance

The key paragraph that structures this chapter on Thoreau's ascetic practice, which we will get to in due time, is itself a response to a major theme of the first paragraphs of *Walden*, where Thoreau describes the "trouble and anxiety" he sees around him in Concord, and suggests that life might be otherwise (I, 16). Trouble and anxiety are not required, he insists. In one passage, he suggests that his neighbors are suffering their trouble and anxiety as a form of penance. "I have travelled a good deal in Concord; and every where, in shops, and offices, and fields, the inhabitants have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways" (I, 3). Penance is a Christian practice through which one who has sinned expresses penitence or regret, and the desire to make the sin right again. After a Christian seeks absolution for his sins, he may be encouraged to do penance for them, usually through some act appropriate to the sin, thus regaining right relation to the one sinned against and to God.

Thoreau goes on to compare the "penance" he sees his townsmen doing to rather severe "Bramin" practices he has read about, "sitting exposed to four fires and looking in the face of the sun; or hanging suspended, with their heads downward, over flames; or looking at the heavens over their shoulders" until their necks are permanently twisted, "or dwelling, chained for life, at the foot of a tree" (I, 3). Those practices were "hardly more incredible and astonishing than the scenes which I daily witness." Those scenes included his townsmen working harder than Thoreau thought they really needed to or should.

The Concordian penance he witnessed was the ceaseless labor and debt he saw his neighbors caught up in (and had been himself to some extent). Those who had inherited large farms and were trying to maintain them often had both the problem of debt (if they had been forced to mortgage the farm, which happened seasonally), and interminable labor. Such work was harder

than the twelve labors of Hercules, Thoreau wrote. At least for Hercules there were only twelve; he found rest at the end of his labor, as these men never do. Such men would have been better off, Thoreau claimed, if they had been born with nothing, because then "they might have seen with clearer eyes what field they were called to labor in" (I, 4). One of the problems with the anxiety and strain that Thoreau sees these men suffering is that it blinds them to their callings. Being called is hearing a summons, often a divine one, to a form of life and often an associated occupation. The farms these men inherited gave them the capacity to grow their wealth, but took away from them the opportunity to reflect on what God might be calling them to do. Thoreau suggested that in trying to maintain their property, such men were ignoring the call of the gospel.

He wrote that their ceaseless toil was oriented toward an aim that was ultimately, religiously, worthless.

But men labor under a mistake. The better part of the man is soon ploughed into the soil for compost. By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool's life, as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before. (I, 5)

The labor these men do is part of a mistaken understanding of the purpose of human life. "The better part of man is soon ploughed into the soil." This implies both that most of a man is composted when he dies, though not all, and also that the part of a human person that is buried has more value than the rest of the person. Laying up treasures, the aim of these men's labor, is futile not only because you die and you cannot take them with you when you do, but also because even before you die you have a tenuous relationship to them: they may disappear before you if the moths or the rust or the thieves get them. The allusion to "an old book" is the first

biblical allusion in *Walden*, and it, like the line about how to give alms that I discussed in Chapter 3, points to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, again from Chapter 6, this time, verses 19-20. I quote here Matthew 6:19-24:

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great *is* that darkness! No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

Here, Jesus says that it is better to lay up treasures in heaven than treasures on earth. This is, in part, because you can lose the treasures you lay up on earth – the moth can eat them, rust can corrupt them, thieves can steal them. But more importantly, "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." The treasure that you can lay up on earth will keep you from God, in that it will hold your heart. "Ye cannot serve God and Mammon." Thus, when the farmers who have inherited large lands spend their lives serving the labor their farms require, they follow what is "commonly called necessity," but is in fact a dire religious mistake. It is a mistake that risks turning them away from God. "It is a fool's life, as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before." The labor it requires does not leave time for the most important parts of life. "The finest qualities in our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling. Yet we do not treat ourselves nor one another thus tenderly" (I, 6). Thoreau's aim is to

persuade the reader that there is another form of life he may pursue, one that will preserve the finest qualities of his nature. It must be tenderer than the overly rigorous penance he sees among young farmers.

Those who have inherited farms, who work too hard, are not the only ones Thoreau addresses. From the beginning of the chapter he identifies an audience among those who are poor quite specifically. "Perhaps these pages are more particularly addressed to poor students." And then he suggests that all who read it should take from it only what applies to them. Some will find it useful and others will not. It is for the reader to discern. "As for the rest of my readers, they will accept such portions as apply to them. I trust that none will stretch the seams in putting on the coat, for it may do good service to him whom it fits" (I, 2). This is interesting to me because it shows that he knows the renunciation he describes will not be good advice for everyone. Indeed, a few paragraphs later, after describing those with inherited wealth, he writes to those who have no such fortune. "Some of you, we all know, are poor, find it hard to live, are sometimes, as it were, gasping for breath" (I, 7). To these readers, Thoreau offers sympathy in the face of constant debt. His own experience has helped him to see how hard such a life is.

I have no doubt that some of you who read this book are unable to pay for all the dinners which you have actually eaten, or for the coats and shoes which are fast wearing or are already worn out, and have come to this page to spend borrowed or stolen time, robbing your creditors for an hour. It is very evident what mean and sneaking lives many of you live, for my sight has been whetted by experience... (I, 7)

The passage goes on in one long sixteen-line sentence joined by semicolons. It describes what it's like trying to earn enough money to get out of debt, the number of methods "you" employ to

get work, and the deepest irony of all: that you work yourself sick to protect yourself for when you become sick.

It is very evident what mean and sneaking lives many of you live, for my sight has been whetted by experience; always on the limits, trying to get into business and trying to get out of debt, a very ancient slough, called by the Latins *æs alienum*, another's brass, for some of their coins were still made of brass; always promising to pay, promising to pay, tomorrow, and dying to-day, insolvent; seeking to curry favor, to get custom by how many modes, only not state-prison offenses; lying, flattering, voting, contracting yourselves into a nutshell of civility, or dilating into an atmosphere of thin and vaporous generosity, that you may persuade your neighbor to let you make his shoes, or his hat, or his coat, or his carriage, or import his groceries for him; making yourselves sick, that you may lay up something against a sick day, something to be tucked away in an old chest, or in a stocking behind the plastering, or, more safely, in the brick bank; no matter where, no matter how much or how little. (I, 7)

The form of this one long sentence adds emphasis to its message: those in Concord who are poor are – in a breathless, ceaseless way – desperate to pay their debt and save just a little, no matter how much. They are doing all that they can (even voting!) to seek advantage in the world of commerce. But as with the overly rigorous labor of the farmers, the work never ends. It is in this sense that it is desperate, and it is in this context that Thoreau writes what is one of the most famous lines of the book. "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (I, 9). But such desperation is the opposite of the wisdom that Thoreau pursues. "It is characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things" (I, 9).

Thoreau has described a form of life in which labor is incessant and pointless. The feats of penance he sees being done every day in Concord, those that are as incredible and astonishing as the overly rigorous forms of the "Bramin" practice he had read about, risk turning people away from God and causing harm to "the finest qualities of our nature." It is itself a form of asceticism, in that it runs on renunciation, but it gives up all the wrong things in pursuit of all the wrong things. We have to treat ourselves and one another more tenderly.

Thoreau's response to the overly rigorous asceticism he diagnoses in his townsmen is to describe another asceticism, one that will respond to the difficulties he sees his townsmen facing with tenderness instead of endless rigor. There are necessities, Thoreau admits, but they are not the things we think they are. We have not tried to really distinguish between necessity and luxury. And to distinguish between them is important, most of all because luxury does more harm than good.

Thoreau thinks that wisdom is nearly impossible in the lap of luxury. In this, he echoes the story of Jesus and the rich young man in that gospel passage I discussed in the previous chapter. From Thoreau's perspective, when Jesus told the man that he should sell everything, that advice was not only for the sake of the man's eternal salvation. Thoreau wrote that poverty was essential not simply to holiness, but also to knowledge. "None can be an impartial or wise observer of human life but from the vantage ground of what *we* should call voluntary poverty" (I, 19). Knowledge itself, and the practice of observation that Thoreau took to be so central to its pursuit, was impossible in the lap of luxury. Such luxuries are "positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind" (I, 19). A hindrance is an obstacle; it hides what lies behind it. Wisdom requires impartial observation and the knowledge it imparts, and with respect to this what we call luxury

is an impediment, and what we call poverty is an aid. Thus the emphasis on "we": *we* call it poverty, but it leads to true wealth.⁹¹

voluntary poverty

I describe the most prominent feature of Thoreau's asceticism, which he – like much of the Christian tradition – once called "voluntary poverty." This practice, of conscientiously living on little, was related to a sense Thoreau had, which was theologically motivated, that the practice of property ownership was idolatry. The idea was something like this: God gave nature to humanity in common, partly as a way of giving God's self to them. Nature thus represents important features of God's life with humanity. For me to take permanent ownership of a part of nature for myself was therefore to act as though God's grace was mine alone. This was, ultimately, the reason to resist slavery, which was a particularly unjust instantiation of ownership because of the special status of human beings. But slavery was only the worst form of the in-any-case dubious the practice of ownership.

But there are some things that each person does need. Like Jack Turner in Chapter Two, Thoreau does not think you can be free without the necessities. There are basic material prerequisites to freedom.

⁹¹ Cavell observes that this is one of Thoreau's characteristic strategies for making the reader examine his own commitments.

First, there is his insistence on the idea of what we call something, or what something is said by us to be. In the opening fifty pages of *Walden* there are a dozen instances of modifications like "so-called" or "what is called."... The point of modification is to suggest that our words are our calls or claims upon the objects and contexts of our world; they show how we count phenomena, what counts for us. The point is to get us to withhold a word, to hold ourselves before it, so that we may assess our allegiance to it, to the criteria in terms of which we apply it. Our faithlessness to our language repeats our faithlessness to all our shared commitments.

Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 64–65.

The necessities of life for man in this climate may, accurately enough, be distributed under the several heads of Food, Shelter, Clothing, and Fuel; for not till we have secured these are we prepared to entertain the true problems of life with freedom and a prospect of success. (I, 17)

The practices that Thoreau describes engaging in begin with the essentials, with clothing, shelter, and food. He describes them because he wants the reader to know how he was able to live for the period he did at Walden on so little money. "As this business was to be entered into without the usual capital, it may not be easy to conjecture where those means, that will still be indispensable to every such undertaking, were to be obtained" (I, 35). His explanation begins with his attitude toward clothing. This sets the scene for the general strategy Thoreau thinks we should take toward entering into any business without the usual capital: need less. "As for Clothing, to come at once to the practical part of the question, perhaps we are led oftener by the love of novelty, and a regard for the opinions of men, in procuring it, than by true utility" (I, 35). True utility would often suggest that we do not need as many new clothes as we usually think we do. We can need less simply by acknowledging that we are usually led by love of novelty (in the sense of fashion) and needn't be.

In fact, Thoreau suggests that we ought to be suspicious of undertaking any form of life that *would* require new clothes. "I say, beware of all enterprises that require new clothes, and not rather a new wearer of clothes." We should aim to resist the love of novelty in our clothes, in part because it may distract us from becoming the new men we ought to become.

Perhaps we should never procure a new suit, however ragged or dirty the old, until we have so conducted, so enterprised or sailed in some way, that we feel like new men in the old, and that to retain it would be like keeping new wine in old bottles. Our moulting

season, like that of the fowls, must be a crisis in our lives. The loon retires to solitary ponds to spend it. Thus also the snake casts its slough, and the caterpillar its wormy coat, by an internal industry and expansion; for clothes are but our outmost cuticle and mortal coil. Otherwise we shall be found sailing under false colors, and be inevitably cashiered at last by our own opinion, as well as that of mankind. (I, 36)

This is interesting in part because it suggests that principle of simplicity he suggests at first, that we do not need new clothes, is not an absolute principle. Rather, the point is that new clothes only suit a person when he has so changed as to need new clothes to reflect his new self. He further analogizes the attempt to become a new man to the life cycles of other animals.

Like clothing, shelter is "a necessary of life" (I, 42). And Thoreau describes what sort of "dwelling house" he thinks is best. "Consider first how slight a shelter is absolutely necessary" (I, 44). Just as his solution to the problem of how to get by cheaply with respect to clothing was 'need less,' so too with shelter. As evidence of how little shelter we actually need, Thoreau takes the example of the Penobscot Indians that he had seen in Concord, "living in tents of thin cotton cloth, while the snow was nearly a foot deep around them." And it's not merely that we *can* get by with less, that we should suffer a little for the freedom that comes with living on little. It is also – perhaps surprisingly – more *pleasurable* for us, better for us, to do so.

For Thoreau, being free of the financial burden of a big house is a delight. He describes a tool box he saw railroad workers using once, "six feet long by three wide." Such a box would make an acceptable shelter, he writes. "It suggested to me that every man who was hard pushed might get such a one for a dollar, and, having bored a few auger holes in it, to admit the air at least, get into it when it rained and at night, and hook down the lid, and so have freedom in his love, and in

his soul be free" (I, 44). But the toolbox is not merely sufficient as shelter in Thoreau's description. He describes what good, what pleasures, would redound to the resident of such a shelter. "You could sit up as late as you pleased, and, whenever you got up, go abroad without any landlord or house-lord dogging you for rent. Many a man is harassed to death to pay the rent of a larger and more luxurious box who would not have frozen to death in such a box as this. I am far from jesting." Thoreau often makes jokes. This is one of the key rhetorical features of his writing as I discuss in Chapter 6. Here, he steps back from that to say that the idea he presents may seem funny, but it is also practical. This sort of shelter may seem strange to some, but if it enables you to sit up as late as you pleased, and in addition have freedom in your love, and in your soul be free, isn't it the best house you could have?

A person clothed and housed still must eat to retain the vital heat. Thoreau is concerned both with how to get the food a person needs to eat – to grow or buy it – and also how to prepare it. With respect to its price, Thoreau writes that his food cost "in money about twenty-seven cents a week." What he ate was "rye and Indian meal without yeast, potatoes, rice, a very little salt pork, molasses, and salt, and my drink water" (I, 82). He found that this simple diet was sufficient.

He describes the way his bread-making changed during his time at Walden, as he studied the ancient art of bread-making.

I made a study of the ancient and indispensable art of bread-making, consulting such authorities as offered, going back to the primitive days and first invention of the unleavened kind, when from the wildness of nuts and meats men first reached the mildness and refinement of this diet, and travelling gradually down in my studies through that accidental souring of the dough which, it is supposed, taught the leavening process,

and through the various fermentations thereafter, till I came to the "good, sweet, wholesome bread," the staff of life. (I, 85)

The recipe he comes to prefer he finds also in Marcus Porcius Cato: "Make kneaded bread thus. Wash your hands and trough well. Put the meal into the trough, add water gradually, and knead it thoroughly. When you have kneaded it well, mould it, and bake it under a cover" (I, 85). Thus, bread making is a form of philosophy taught by the ancients. Thoreau's vision of food practices focuses in "Economy" on the "art of bread-making" and he insists that such art is most beautiful when practiced simply, as it is too rarely done nowadays. "Yet so far are we from simplicity and independence that, in Concord, fresh and sweet meal is rarely sold in the shops" (I, 86). It is so rare to find a food philosopher practiced in bread-making that finding supplies for this practice is not easy.

Thoreau thinks we can live on less and simpler fare than we think. Emerson mentions in his journals that he likes Henry Thoreau's view on diet: "If a man does not believe that he can thrive on board nails, I will not talk with him."⁹² Thoreau mentions that there are those who ask him if he thinks he can live on vegetable food alone. In "Economy" he answers in a roundabout way – saying "I can live on board nails" – but the question will come up again, in depth, in "Higher Laws," where Thoreau writes about hunting and fishing and food practices.

In "Higher Laws" Thoreau wrote "Our whole life is startlingly moral. There is never an instant's truce between virtue and vice" (XI, 10). He meant that everything we do, "eat, drink, cohabit, void excrement and urine, and the like," has moral implications we cannot avoid (XI, 13). He writes that he was hesitant to say these things "because I cannot speak of them without betraying my impurity" (XI, 13). Perfect purity is an aim, but one that remains elusive. "If you

⁹² Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, with Annotations*, vol. 5 (New York: Houghton Mifflin company, 1914), 414.

would avoid uncleanness, and all the sins, work earnestly, though it be at cleaning a stable" (XI, 12).

critique of property

The second movement of *Walden* begins with "The Bean-Field," in which Thoreau integrates the more economic focus of "Economy" and the more social focus of "Solitude." He does this by showing ways in which his labor itself has a social aspect. He becomes intimate with the object of his labor. "What shall I learn of beans or beans of me? I cherish them, I hoe them, early and late I have an eye on them" (VII, 1). Or, "Consider the intimate and curious acquaintance one makes with various kinds of weeds" (VII, 10). This social way of doing the work of raising beans appeals to ancient poetry and mythology. "Ancient poetry and mythology suggest, at least, that husbandry was once a sacred art." This husbandry as sacred art he contrasts with the way husbandry is usually practiced. "It is pursued with irreverent haste and heedlessness by us, our object being to have large farms and large crops merely" (VII, 16).

Crucially, he includes himself in the critique. "By avarice and selfishness, and a groveling habit, from which none of us is free, of regarding the soil as property, or the means of acquiring property chiefly, the landscape is deformed, husbandry is degraded with us, and the farmer leads the meanest of lives" (VII, 16). This is a radical critique, as it suggests that it is not only the means of acquiring property that are corrupt, but the entitlement to property itself. He takes the critique of property to its fullest extent at the very end of "The Bean-Field." "The true husbandman will cease from anxiety, as the squirrels manifest no concern whether the woods will bear chestnuts this year or not, and finish his labor every day, relinquishing his claim to the produce of his fields, and sacrificing in his mind not only his first but his last fruits also" (VII, 17). The sacrifice of the last fruits, in addition to the first, goes beyond the biblical command to

sacrifice first fruits to God. In this way, it echoes Thoreau's insistence that the ten percent tithe was insufficient. Thoreau endorses living like a squirrel, who does not worry whether the woods will produce chestnuts, but works every day without expecting the fruits of his work to be solely his own.

Thoreau discussed his views about property with Emerson, as Emerson recorded in his journal in November of 1938:

My brave Henry Thoreau walked with me to Walden this afternoon and complained of the proprietors who compelled him, to whom, as much as to any, the whole world belonged, to walk in a strip of road and crowded him out of all the rest of God's earth. He must not get over the fence: but to the building of that fence he was no party. Suppose, he said, some great proprietor, before he was born, had bought up the whole globe. So had he been hustled out of nature. Not having been privy to any of these arrangements, he does not feel called on to consent to them, and so cuts fishpoles in the woods without asking who has a better title to the wood than he. I defended, of course, the good institution as a scheme, not good, but the best that could be hit on for making the woods and waters and fields available to wit and worth, and for restraining the bold, bad man.⁹³

Thoreau seems to have been in a rather contrary mood. He hated when property owners fences got in the way of his wandering, and he resented the way they acted like God's earth was theirs. Emerson goes on to write that after his defense of "the good institution" he encouraged Thoreau to write a poem about the feeling he had, and Thoreau said he worried that "in doing justice to the thought, the man did not always do justice to himself, the poem ought to sing itself."

Thoreau's sense was that if he was not privy to the arrangements, he does not have to consent to them, and can walk without worry wherever he will. God's prior gift is still in force.

⁹³ Ibid., 5:129.

authorites

I describe Thoreau as an ascetic because I think his interest in and experimentation with diverse ascetic practice is one of the most central features of his religiosity. One reason people have considered him areligious is that the sources to which he appealed in his defense of the way of life he promoted in *Walden* were extremely diverse. How could he be a Christian, people have thought, when he was so interested in the "Hindoo"? Yet, diversity of influence does not areligiosity make. The insistence on purity of influence would leave out most (maybe all?) of the people we take as examples of their religions. Take Thomas Aquinas as just one example. I trace the religious texts and traditions that Thoreau took seriously, diverse as they are. In taking these texts as authoritative, Thoreau cast himself as carrying on these traditions in some sense, and he also shaped what people would come to think of these traditions after him.

According to Thoreau, we know that poverty conduces to wisdom and thus true wealth because "the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor" (I, 19). Among these "wisest" whose example he is encouraging the reader to follow he includes "the ancient philosophers, Chinese, Hindoo, Persian, and Greek." They were "a class than which none has been poorer in outward riches, none so rich in inward." In addition to these, Thoreau invokes a wide variety of spiritual authorities, people he takes to have had insight into the making of a good day and the relationship of that daily structure to the good life as a whole. These are people he hopes to emulate and to encourage his readers to emulate.

From this account, you may receive the impression that Thoreau was invested most deeply in the reinvigoration of ancient philosophical practices. Yet the ancient philosophers and poets he admired were only one source for Thoreau's thinking about practices of simplicity. He found

more recent – and perhaps therefore makes more frequent – examples of simple living in the practices of Indians, those communities native to the Americas. He is emphatic about their superiority to Yankee economic practices especially with respect to modes of shelter. "A comfortable house for a rude and hardy race, that lived mostly out of doors, was once made here almost entirely of such materials as nature furnished ready to their hands" (I, 44). This is praise from Thoreau, and not just because it makes a person's character strong to live closer to the elements, in communion with nature. Indians got their dwelling right because those dwellings were cheap, and thus enabled their freedom. He contrasts what he ironically calls "the savage state" with civilization:

In the large towns and cities, where civilization especially prevails, the number of those who own a shelter is a very small fraction of the whole. The rest pay an annual tax for this outside garment of all, become indispensable summer and winter, which would buy a village of Indian wigwams, but now helps to keep them poor as long as they live...An average house in this neighborhood costs perhaps eight hundred dollars, and to lay up this sum will take from ten to fifteen years of the laborer's life, even if he is not encumbered with a family; – estimating the pecuniary value of every man's labor at one dollar a day, for if some receive more, others receive less; – so that he must have spent more than half his life commonly before *his* wigwam will be earned. If we suppose him to pay rent instead, this is but a doubtful choice of evils. Would the savage have been wise to exchange his wigwam for a palace on these terms? (I, 45)

In Thoreau's view, the mortgaging of your life to your house is ridiculous. Better to imitate the Indian practice, by building shelter with the materials cheapest, and most ready to hand. Simple shelter is an advantage because it avoids the dweller's being kept poor by the palace in which he

lives. This is just one of many respects in which Thoreau thinks Indian practices of simplicity are worthy of imitation.

In addition to his continual appeal to the wisdom of ancient philosophers and Indians, Thoreau seems to have had in mind not only the protestant movements for simplicity in North America ongoing in his time among Quakers and Shakers, but also ancient and medieval Christians. Three examples: He pines for an Abelard for his own period in a passage in which he suggests that the village should spend its money on education: "Can we not hire some Abelard to lecture to us?" (III, 12). Second, he writes of a neighbor, "he belonged to the ancient sect of Coenobites" (IX, 2).⁹⁴ Coenobitic monasticism refers to communal forms of Christian ascetic practice, as opposed to those that emphasize eremitic practice. Where eremitic monks live alone in heritages, praying with others only intermittently, coenobitic monks live together in cooperative communities. And finally, when describing the fish in Walden Pond, he makes a pun on the name of a twelfth-century Christian poverty movement by calling the fish Waldenses (XVI, 5). Unlike in his treatment of ancient philosophy and Indian economic practice, none of these references to Christian practices of simplicity is a thoroughgoing commendation of a particular practice. Yet they do show that Thoreau was aware of Christian ascetic traditions and to some extent identified with them. The Abelard reference in particular seems to indicate that he took them to be in some sense authoritative, though it is also, as in each of these cases a sort of joke.

Thoreau did not take himself to be inventing the idea that simplicity of economy was an aid to wisdom. He took ancient philosophy, Indian communal life, and selective forms of medieval Christianity as prior authorities in the life he sought to build.

⁹⁴ This is also a pun. The man he describes turns out not to be a very good fisherman, thus see-no-bite.

philosophy

Many of these texts and traditions he described as 'philosophy,' which is, for Thoreau, high praise. (Though not the highest praise, which he usually reserved for poetry.) I describe what this sort of philosophy is, with reference to some important contemporary scholarship. These scholars articulate a dissenting movement from within and from the borders of the contemporary discipline of philosophy as practiced in what is called the analytic tradition. Their view is that philosophy is more than discursive practice, though it also includes discursive practice, that in its finest forms its discourse presses toward poetry, and that the apex of philosophy is its transformation of our lives. Thoreau also thought this, and in *Walden* aimed to articulate a philosophy of self-transformation that people could actually use.

With these ancient philosophers and their voluntary poverty in mind, Thoreau writes that there are – in his day – hardly any philosophers. This is because philosophy is not a kind of thinking, but a way of living.

There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live. To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. (I, 19)

To become a philosopher is to live simply, independently, magnanimously, and with trust.

Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy As a Way of Life* argued that philosophy is not only a way of talking and writing; it is also just as importantly a way of doing and living. For the Greeks who gave us the word, *philo-sophia*, it meant the love of a wisdom not yet achieved. They described this practice in words, and their students often wrote down what they heard from their teachers.

We are lucky for those notetakers, because they are the reason we have come to know anything at all about ancient philosophy. But philosophy proper was not – for Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, the Stoics, or the Cynics – the thing that was written down in words. Philosophy was the act described by the words – the pursuit of wisdom through specific daily acts, what Hadot and other commentators have taken to calling spiritual exercises. Those exercises directed the ancients toward wisdom, helped make them more wise, more like the sages. Philosophers were not themselves sages, they were sages in training. Hadot wrote, "To know oneself means, among other things, to know oneself *qua* non-sage: that is, not as a *sophos*, but as a *philo-sophos*, someone *on the way toward* wisdom."⁹⁵ This is why philosophy for Hadot *just is* the exercises of one who is in training, not yet arrived.

Hadot doesn't mention Thoreau in *Philosophy As a Way of Life*, which was first published in French in 1981, but Hadot did write about Thoreau later in an article whose title Hadot took from *Walden*, "There Are Nowadays Professors of Philosophy, But Not Philosophers."⁹⁶ We understand Thoreau better, Hadot argued, when we place his insistence on the philosophical life *lived* in a longer tradition whose history begins in ancient philosophy. The Stoics and Epicurians, who Hadot sees Thoreau as sharing elements of his thinking with, shared in common an understanding of philosophy as the life pursuing wisdom, and the writing about that life as a second order thing. What *Walden* the text gives us, Hadot wrote, is an *account* of philosophy, that is, an account of life in the woods. "*Walden* itself, that is to say, the story that Thoreau tells of the way in which he lived these philosophical practices and exercises, is a philosophic

⁹⁵ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold Davidson (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995), 90.

⁹⁶ Pierre Hadot, "There Are Nowadays Professors of Philosophy, but Not Philosophers," trans. Mason Marshall and J. Aaron Simmons, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 19, no. 3 (2005): 229–37; Pierre Hadot, "Il y a de nos jours des professeurs de philosophie, mais pas de philosophes," in *Henry D. Thoreau*, ed. Michel Granger, Herne, no. 65 (Paris: Éditions de l'Herne, 1994).

discourse that, though admirable, seems to me of another order than philosophy itself, that is to say, other than the experience that Thoreau has really lived." The philosophy was life in the woods, the book about philosophy was *Walden*.

Hadot's phrase, 'philosophy as a way of life' has been influential enough that it now carries its meaning with it, apart from the ancient history Hadot was especially concerned with. Sometimes the phrase is used without reference to Hadot. This is true to the extent that *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on Thoreau says he "sought to revive a conception of philosophy as a way of life, not only a mode of reflective thought and discourse."⁹⁷ The article doesn't mention Hadot or his role in bringing the idea of 'philosophy as a way of life' to prominence in the twentieth century. Hadot gained this prominence in some circles of the contemporary academy because he voiced – in a particularly powerful way – a spreading dissatisfaction with specialization of the disciplines in the academy, especially among scholars of the humanities and in particular among those on the fringes of the contemporary discipline of philosophy in the English-speaking world. This is a critique mounted from all sides and within against the forms that have become dominant in philosophy departments. Philosophers as diverse as G. E. M. Anscombe (with her 1958 "Modern Moral Philosophy"), Iris Murdoch (1970), Stanley Cavell, and Martha Nussbaum (especially in 1990 *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*) have mounted this critique, both through what they said and by how they said it. Hadot struck a chord among a diverse group of humanist scholars who have continued to hope that philosophers might "come out of their more cramped focus and idiom."⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Rick Anthony Furtak, "Henry David Thoreau," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2014, 2014, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/thoreau/>.

⁹⁸ Akeel Bilgrami, "The Wider Significance of Naturalism: A Genealogical Essay," in *Naturalism and Normativity*, ed. Mario De Caro and David MacArthur (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

Thoreau has a place in this ongoing conversation. One recent volume of collected essays in philosophy makes the case for Thoreau's place in the discipline of philosophy, not only as contributor to the mainstays of philosophical inquiry (metaphysics and epistemology, aesthetics, ethics, social and political philosophy, and the theory of value) but also as one who should force the discipline to rethink what its essential questions are. "If today we tend to regard a philosopher as someone who has mastered a sophisticated conceptual vocabulary, then we might ask ourselves whether we are working with a diminished conception of the discipline."⁹⁹ The essays in the collection aim at "opening up the lines of communication between Thoreau's project and the central areas of [contemporary] philosophy" as a way to help the discipline reorient itself toward more integrative questions.¹⁰⁰ This volume continues the critique of the discipline of philosophy I described earlier.

spiritual awakening

The idea that philosophy is about more than discourse is closely related to the central theme of spiritual renewal in *Walden*, where this renewal is often represented as awakening. Awakening is itself, in Thoreau's account of it, a kind of being healed because renewed. And the quintessential expression of the importance he places on it comes in a few pages at the center of "Where I Lived and What I Lived for" that begin thus:

Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself. I have been as sincere a worshipper of Aurora as the Greeks. I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did. (II, 14)

⁹⁹ Furtak, Ellsworth, and Reid, *Thoreau's Importance for Philosophy*, 2.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

This begins one of the longest meditations in *Walden* on waking up, and one of the central passages for understanding Thoreau's relationship to labor not only as self-reliance for its own sake but also for the renewal it allows of self and community. The passage asserts what I take to be Thoreau's cardinal ethical mandate: 'wake up.'

That man who does not believe that each day contains an earlier, more sacred, and auroral hour than he has yet profaned, has despaired of life, and is pursuing a descending and darkening way...It matters not what the clocks say or the attitudes and labors of men. Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me. Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep...To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face? (II, 14)¹⁰¹

Thoreau takes it that this attitude to awaking – that we can always do it more, earlier, that it is never fully accomplished – is a religious pursuit.

To emphasize the point he alludes in this passage to the story from Exodus when God shows himself to Moses while Moses hides in the cleft of a rock. Because no one can see God's face and live, Moses only sees the back side of God. The man who is fully awake, Thoreau suggests in this passage, is awesome like God; you cannot look on his face and live. Awakening is a kind of growth in spiritual power.

Elsewhere, Thoreau reiterates the necessity of continuous renewal. The epigraph to Stanley Cavell's *The Senses of Walden* invokes the use Thoreau makes of his daily bathing as a religious symbol when it quotes Luther:

For all our life should be baptism, and the fulfilling of the sign, or sacrament, of baptism; we have been set free from all else and wholly given over to baptism alone, that is, to

¹⁰¹ Exodus 33:20: "And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live."

death and resurrection. This glorious liberty of ours, and this understanding of baptism have been carried captive in our day.¹⁰²

Thoreau's morning bath is a daily reminder to wake up to his freedom, to "do it again, and again, and forever again." Here, as elsewhere in *The Senses of Walden*, Cavell emphasizes Thoreau as an interpreter of Christianity.

We have heard it said, "We shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ...every tongue shall confess to God. So then, every one shall give account of himself to God" (Romans 14:10-13). But *Walden* shows that we are there; every tongue has confessed what it can; we have heard everything there is to hear. There were prophets, but there is no Zion; knowing that, Jesus fulfilled them, but the kingdom of heaven is not entered into; knowing that, the Founding Fathers brought both testaments to this soil, and there is no America; knowing that, Jonathan Edwards helped bring forth a Great Awakening, and we are not awake.¹⁰³

According to Cavell, Thoreau sees Christianity as a long story of disappointments and fulfillments, deaths and resurrections. In his moment, that story calls each person to a true awakening.

vocation

While Hadot presented one prominent recent example of the argument that philosophy was first of all a way of life, he did not detail the depth of the influence that Greek and Roman classical texts had on Thoreau's intellectual life. Hadot wrote that Thoreau "found, perhaps spontaneously and unintentionally, perhaps under the influence of certain writings of the

¹⁰² Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 29.

Ancients or of the Moderns, what Epicurus and his disciples had practiced and taught."¹⁰⁴

Thoreau scholars had long recognized the extent to which Thoreau's knowledge of "the Ancients" shaped his quite particular views on philosophy. Ethyl Seybold's 1951 *Thoreau: the Quest and the Classics* details Thoreau's deep knowledge of the classical authors that helped form Thoreau's view of philosophy. They were not, for the most part, the authors that Hadot has in mind. Thoreau's selection was more literary than philosophical for the most part (though of course drawing that distinction in the ancient period thwarts the argument that philosophy is a way of life.)

Seybold described Thoreau's diverse interests as part of one effort in his life. She asked, "although we may group together the hermit, the primitive, and the Indian lover, what common denominator can we find, say, for the classics and the North American Indian?"¹⁰⁵ She replied, "he spent a quarter of a century in a quest for transcendent reality, in an attempt to discover the secret of the universe."¹⁰⁶ She argued that his various efforts were unified by one central aim. "He was a classicist, just as he was a naturalist or a hermit or a writer, only because and as far as his classicism furthered his search for reality."¹⁰⁷ This is the "quest" of Seybold's title, an effort that drove Thoreau through the course of his adult life, that Seybold suggests was a religious vocation. She writes, "Why should not a man's faith determine his work? Newspaper editors might think John Brown insane because he believed himself divinely appointed for his work, but, [quoting Thoreau] 'They talk as if it were impossible that a man could be "divinely appointed" in these days to do any work whatever; as if vows and religion were out of date as connected with any man's daily work...'" Here, she quotes from *A Plea for Captain John Brown* and in doing so

¹⁰⁴ Hadot, "There Are Nowadays Professors of Philosophy, but Not Philosophers."

¹⁰⁵ Ethel Seybold, *Thoreau: The Quest and the Classics*, Yale Studies in English, v. 116 (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1951), 2.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

implies that Thoreau had his own single-minded vocation. "He was that rare phenomenon, a practitioner of his faith."¹⁰⁸ This focus, she thinks, may make us wonder about his sanity. "One of the reasons we have been slow to admit the truth about Thoreau is that it seems to us the equivalent of calling him 'insane.'"¹⁰⁹

[more on vocation]

conclusion

Like the first chapter of *Walden*, the "Conclusion" argues that though his neighbors' lives are lived with too much haste, it could be otherwise. "Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises?" it asks (XVIII, 10). There is an alternative to this life of trouble and anxiety, and it is the renewal of life, a form of spiritual awakening. The chapter suggests that one of the most important practices for spiritual awakening is the cultivation of poverty, the voluntary poverty of the beginning of the book. "Cultivate poverty like a garden herb, like sage" (XVIII, 13). This is important because it will change our view of what goodness is.

How long shall we sit in our porticoes practising idle and musty virtues, which any work would make impertinent. As if one were to begin the day with long-suffering, and hire a man to hoe his potatoes; and in the afternoon go forth to practise Christian meekness and charity with goodness aforethought! (XVIII, 16)

The sort of practices that Thoreau thinks are necessary in poverty, especially those required for food, shelter, and clothing (in an economy still largely focused on agriculture), should change what practitioners think is true Christian meekness and charity. Such practices change the very

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 7.

meaning of the words we use to describe them. "In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness" (XVIII, 5). They also conduce to a life like the one Thoreau had represented in the middle of book: a life of piety, wonder, praise, and delight.

Chapter 5 – The Woodchopper

Humility is still a human virtue.

Thoreau, *Journal*, Fall 1846¹¹⁰

Thoreau thought that how we live really matters, that the clothes we wear and the house we choose and the food we eat is a big part of what we contribute to our social and political communities. Such practices are also, crucially, central to what our religious lives will be. This is true for everyone; everyone needs clothing, shelter, and food, even if there are of course always those who do not have enough of any of those things. But there are particular burdens on writers, for whom writing is often also a daily practice. In Thoreau's view, for such people writing itself was an ethical act.

In Chapters 5 and 6 I examine two different topics for which Thoreau's view of writing as an ethical act should make a difference. Both are also related to the mode and genre of *Walden*. The first of these two chapters, Chapter 5, examines a trope common in the mode of pastoral literature, which is the representation of the rustic country-dweller, and it argues that there is an ongoing conversation within the modern pastoral tradition over what the just representation of such figures entails. Romanticism holds within it the critique of selfish romanticism. The second, Chapter 6, examines the role of play and humor in Thoreau's life and writing, especially as those features seem to contrast with his deep earnestness.

Those among us who share political concern for the fate of the biological world sometimes worry that the human tendency to selfishness thwarts the doing of justice for nature and for the

¹¹⁰ Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Journal, Volume 2: 1842-1848*, 350.

poor. Scholars of religion and ecology have often attributed the environmental harms of the industrial period to anthropocentrism, to the prioritizing of human interests over all others.¹¹¹ But movements for environmental justice and against environmental racism have pointed out that while it is powerful, anthropocentric bias does not yield its benefits to humans evenly.¹¹² The wealthy, white, and powerful have control – it sometimes seems – over environmental decision-making that impacts most pressingly those without power, non-whites, and the poor. And the powerful tend to make decisions to their own benefit. Even when they don't they are likely to become philanthropists of the sort Thoreau worried about, who think they can do good without being good and without righting the relationships in which they stand.

On top of outright viciousness and knowing neglect, there is a problem with knowledge. Humans tend to see most clearly that which is close to us, which means our decisions are often biased toward our own concerns. This is true not only because we want the best things for ourselves, out of vicious selfishness, but because even good-willed people have limits to knowledge that disable their understanding what is far from them. This natural solipsism makes it hard for those in positions of power to truly reckon the effects of their decisions on others less sheltered than they are from environmental impact, whether those others are human or more-than-human. Therefore, some contemporary environmental philosophers and ecotheologians view giving voice to the human and more-than-human perspectives that would otherwise go

¹¹¹ Of course there is much debate over whether "anthropocentrism" should be blamed for environmental harm, and whether it is even possible to do ethics without some form of anthropocentrism. But I take a very limited version of this claim to be relatively noncontroversial; human environmental impacts have been harmful, and they have been caused in part by human selfishness. The early touchstone for the case against anthropocentrism in religion and ecology has been Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science*, New Series, 155, no. 3767 (March 10, 1967): 1203–7. A helpful summary of the story since White is Willis Jenkins, "After Lynn White: Religious Ethics and Environmental Problems," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 37, no. 2 (June 1, 2009): 283–309.

¹¹² One important work on these movements in the US is Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990).

unheard as a central task for would-be allies of nature and the poor who rely on it. I share this view, and admire those who do this work.

The project in contemporary ecological and theological discourse, of giving voice to nature and those who live close to it, has an analogy in literature by authors who have been called "Romantic" in Britain and their heirs in the United States.¹¹³ Romanticism in general glorified – we now say 'romanticized' – the lives of so-called 'common men' close to nature. Wordsworth wrote in the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* that the subjects of his poems were "incidents and situations from common life," and that he wanted to "describe them...as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men." In this, he sought to give voice to common people, in the belief that those in "humble and rustic life" express the virtue that exists in plain language, simple feeling, rural occupations, and natural forms.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ In this chapter I write about literature that takes nature and people who live in it as its subject. In general, I refer to 'romanticism' when I want to indicate the particularities of the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary movement in England, and I use 'pastoral' as a broader category to include most other literature that takes nature and the people who live and work there as its subject. This very broad use of the term pastoral is controversial in literary studies, where at least one important critic has written that such broad use is an "irritant." Paul Alpers, *What Is Pastoral?* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1997), ix. Further, in the North American ecological context, there were no pastoral shepherds in either Native North America or early English colonies. Gordon Sayre has argued that in North America the genre is therefore inevitably caught up in the colonization of Native American landscapes and people. Gordon M. Sayre, "The Oxymoron of American Pastoralism," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 69, no. 4 (2013): 1–23. I think that though the term 'pastoral' is broad and inevitably caught up in the justification of colonialism in the Americas, it is nonetheless useful for identifying literature that deals in certain themes. Alpers insisted on a definition, but it too was broad, in that it included poetry, drama, and prose whose subject was "herdsmen and their lives" (22).

¹¹⁴ The "Preface" is a text that underwent many changes over the course of Wordsworth's life. Most notably, there is the original 1798 version and the greatly expanded 1800 version, to which additions were made for an 1802 version. Subsequent publications underwent further, more minor changes. I quote from the edition Thoreau is likely to have read: William Wordsworth, *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth: Together with a Description of the Country of the Lakes in the North of England, Now First Published with His Works*, ed. Henry

But there is a paradox at the center of representing the virtues of simplicity in this way. In identifying their subjects as simple and virtuous, pastoral authors implicitly contrast them with their more complex, vicious counterparts.¹¹⁵ While descriptions of country people as 'simple' and 'plain' are meant as praise in this literature, and often intended to undermine the common valuation of urban over rural culture, they hold two dangers.

First, as has been troublingly confirmed by the historical connections between romanticism and fascism, the romantic trope risks describing vices as virtues. Plain language, simple feeling, rural occupations, and natural forms are not virtuous when they serve to perpetuate injustices against those cast by the romantic story as nonnative.

But second, and this is the problem I shall address in this chapter, the romantic trope risks affirming a mere caricature of the people it describes with admiration, and in this way undermining the author's own aim of truly representing those people and their honest virtues. Pastoral authors may be particularly tempted, out of a perverted piety toward country people or "common men," to subsume the subjects they describe into a monolithic type, to turn everyone they meet – in the fields, on the moor, or in the woods – into a sage.

Reed (Philadelphia: James Kay, Jun. & Brother, 1837), 497. "Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature."

¹¹⁵ One important expositor of this dynamic between 'country' and 'city' in pastoral literature: Williams, *The Country and the City*. A classic work on the power of the pastoral ideal in the American context: Leo Marx, *Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964). See also William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (Norfolk, Conn: New Directions Books, 1960).

The center of this chapter is a portrait of a woodchopper, authored by Thoreau and published in *Walden*. The man who was the model for the portrait lived in Concord, Massachusetts in the middle of the nineteenth century. Thoreau thought hard about how to represent this man, and he likely had Wordsworth's representations of "humble and rustic life" in mind as he did so, both as an example to emulate and as one to supersede.

To show why it makes sense to think this, I compare Thoreau's portrait of the woodchopper to Wordsworth's representation of the "Leech-gatherer" in the poem "Resolution and Independence." The subjects of these portraits share a lot in common. Despite tenuous economic circumstances – in particular dependence on a feature of the natural world (leeches and wood) whose abundance is dwindling – the subjects of these writings maintain an uncommon capacity for delight. In this, they offer much-needed balm to the poet, and in some ways function as teachers to the poet. Both Wordsworth and Thoreau struggled with feelings of what they called "dejection," and both found that their subjects were surprisingly good at avoiding it. In this sense, the woodchopper and the Leech-gatherer are rendered by these authors as sages.

But despite their commonalities, I argue that Thoreau offered a more nuanced representation of the woodchopper than Wordsworth had of the Leech-gatherer. Whereas Wordsworth's Leech-gatherer serves as an easy moral to a story about poetic dejection, Thoreau signals complicated aspects of the woodchopper's character. Whereas Wordsworth's Leech-gatherer speaks only once in the poem, Thoreau represents the speech of the woodchopper many times. Whereas Wordsworth's judgments of the Leech-gatherer's character remain implicit in the poem, Thoreau makes his judgments of the woodchopper explicit and therefore subject to our criticism, and to his. And, crucially, whereas Wordsworth's representation of the Leech-gatherer never doubts itself, Thoreau insists on his own unknowing with respect to the woodchopper. I

suggest that though Thoreau may look condescending (for instance in his portrayal of the woodchopper as intellectually and spiritually deficient), in the context of the tradition to which he is heir he makes an improvement in the representation of the rustic other.

In "Resolution and Independence" Wordsworth struggled with and found a balm for the problem of poetic dejection in a now famous figure, the Leech-gatherer.¹¹⁶ The poem begins with the speaker alone on a walk, in high spirits, "happy as a Boy."¹¹⁷ But his mood soon collapses:

As high as we have mounted in delight
In our dejection do we sink as low,
To me that morning did it happen so;
And fears, and fancies, thick upon me came;
Dim sadness, and blind thought I knew not nor could name.¹¹⁸

This unnamable dejection is a particular burden of poets, according to the speaker of the poem, who suggests that the "up and down" of his "fancy" on that day was an epitome of the life of the poet as a whole.¹¹⁹ "We Poets in our youth begin in gladness;/But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness."¹²⁰ Yet, on the day depicted in the poem, the day of the speaker's rollercoaster of "delight" and "dejection," there appeared to him "a Man from some far region sent;/To give me human strength, and strong admonishment."¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Citations by line numbers to William Wordsworth, *Selected Poems*, ed. Stephen Gill (New York: Penguin Classics, 2005), 137–42.

¹¹⁷ Line 18.

¹¹⁸ Lines 24–28.

¹¹⁹ Line 53.

¹²⁰ Lines 48–49.

¹²¹ Lines 118–119.

Wordsworth describes the "Old Man", "Close by a Pond," his body "bent double" in "pain" or "sickness," "Propped upon a long grey Staff of shaven wood," "Motionless as a Cloud."¹²² Then, as the Old Man looks fixedly "Upon the muddy water" of the pond "As if he had been reading in a book" and stirs it with his staff, the speaker initiates a conversation: "This morning gives us promise of a glorious day."¹²³ The Old Man's response is not quoted, but rather summarized by the speaker. "A gentle answer did the Old Man make,/in courteous speech which forth he slowly drew."¹²⁴ Thus begins a pattern with which the poet goes on to recount most of the conversation between the speaker and the Old Man: the speaker's words are directly quoted, four times, and the speaker summarizes the responses of the Old Man without quoting his words.¹²⁵

His words came feebly, from a feeble chest,
Yet each in solemn order followed each,
With something of a lofty utterance drest;
Choice word, and measured phrase; above the reach
Of ordinary men; a stately speech!¹²⁶

As the Old Man's "stately speech" goes on, however, the speaker's mind wanders: "his voice to me was like a stream/Scarce heard."¹²⁷ The dejection of the earlier stanzas, "the fear that kills," returns for a stanza; the mind of the speaker is distracted by his own thoughts until, "not knowing what the Old Man had said," the speaker repeats the question he had already asked the Old Man.

¹²² Lines 59, 73, 75, 76, 78, 79, 82.

¹²³ Line 85-88, 91.

¹²⁴ Line 92-93.

¹²⁵ Elfenbein notes that the poem quotes the Old Man's "lofty utterance" directly in only three lines. Andrew Elfenbein, *Romanticism and the Rise of English* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 45–46.

¹²⁶ Lines 99-103.

¹²⁷ Lines 114-115.

In the penultimate stanza the speaker says that while the Old Man was talking, repeating his answer the second time, the speaker was "troubled" by thoughts about the Old Man "Wandering about alone and silently."¹²⁸ Then, in the last stanza, the speaker notices (suddenly tuning in to what the man is actually saying) that while he has been troubled to think of the Old Man wandering and alone, in fact the man though "decrepit" was "firm of mind," cheerful even.

And soon he this with other matter blended,
Chearfully uttered, with demeanour kind,
But stately in the main; and, when he ended,
I could have laughed myself to scorn, to find
In that decrepit Man so firm a mind.

'God,' said I, 'be my help and stay secure;

I'll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor.'¹²⁹

Thus, the poem ends. This last stanza implies (abruptly, to my mind) that thinking "of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor" somehow treats the problem of poetic dejection. The Leech-gatherer shows the speaker that firmness of mind is possible in any state—even decrepit and alone on the moor, looking for leeches that are rare. If this is so, then the poet has reason to think his own up and down from delight to dejection is unnecessary; the example of the Leech-gatherer shows someone who, though in a situation that might understandably cause dejection, nonetheless maintains "so firm a mind." The Leech-gatherer is able to avoid the up and down experienced, and regretted, by the speaker.

¹²⁸ Line 138.

¹²⁹ Lines 141-147.

As he wrote in the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth valued "language really used by men," and he took his own poetry to be exceptional in the extent to which it incorporated everyday speech patterns and diction. The "Preface" even worried that the poems were so different from what readers would expect that some might not call it poetry. "They will look round for poetry, and will be induced to inquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title."¹³⁰ To the extent that Wordsworth included and valued the language of the rustic figures he represented, he took himself to be engaged in a massive literary innovation.

But consider the structure of speaking and listening in "Resolution and Independence," which was composed around the same time as the "Preface." Wordsworth's Old Man is quoted once; the speaker mostly summarizes his speech. Readers might reasonably wonder whether Wordsworth's views on "humble and rustic life," combined with his admiration for the Old Man—his romantic piety—might have tempted him to oversimplify his representation of the Leech-gatherer, to reduce the Old Man from a particular, complicated man to a type: the simple sage who teaches how to overcome poetic dejection. The only names the poem ever gives the man are "Old Man" and "Leech-gatherer." The fact that the poem quotes his words only once, briefly; plus the wandering mind of the speaker during conversation with the Old Man; plus the easy resolution that the image of "the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor" offers the speaker's "troubles"—all point to a distracted idealization of the Old Man on Wordsworth's part.¹³¹ What is

¹³⁰ Wordsworth, *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, 497.

¹³¹ Some interpreters go as far as to argue that Wordsworth exploits his subjects, and one likens this exploitation in "The Solitary Reaper" to rape. I find such analogies suggestive, though ultimately unconvincing. Nancy A. Jones, "The Rape of the Rural Muse: Wordsworth's 'The Solitary Reaper' as a Version of Pastourelle," in *Rape and Representation*, ed. Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver, Gender and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 263–77. Alpers doesn't find what he calls "objectionable appropriation" in "The Solitary Reaper," but he doesn't exonerate Wordsworth either: "Far from denying that Wordsworth could be guilty of

important, in the poem, is the poet; the Old Man is a prop. Such a reduction, though motivated by admiration, would be objectionable, in that it would erase the human complexity of the Old Man, would subsume him into a type: the Wordsworthian sage.

That suspicion is complicated by three things. First, by Wordsworth's representation of the speaker's wandering mind. Because the speaker becomes distracted from the speech of the Old Man twice in quick succession, that distraction reads like a mistake, a sort of hiccup, or a misstep in the movement of the poem. The representation of the inattention of the speaker is purposeful; it may refer to the way dejection can lead to selfishness, and part of the poem's purpose may be to represent the problem of solipsism. This complicates the straightforward view that the inattention of the speaker demonstrates a failure of the author to fairly represent his subject. Perhaps one of the things the poem is *about* is how easy it is for authors to ignore their subjects and turn them into symbols.

Second, what the Old Man says has deep significance in the context of the poem. In response to the speaker's asking, for the second time, "what is it you do?" the Old Man replies, and part of his response is quoted as three key lines of the poem. The choice to include only one direct quotation stresses the importance of what the Old Man says.

He with a smile did then his words repeat;
And said, that, gathering Leeches, far and wide
He travelled; stirring thus about his feet
The waters of the Ponds where they abide.

such a thing, I would argue that misplaced eroticism and objectionable appropriation are distinctly evident in "To a Highland Girl." (257) One thing that is helpful about consideration of the Leech-gatherer in this context is that his gender position as an "Old Man" allows us to see the issue of purported misrepresentation and appropriation apart from the troubling context of gender violence. In the case of the Leech-gatherer the problem would not be objectionable appropriation – Wordsworth takes nothing from the man – but rather objectionable heroization, Wordsworth turns the man into a solution to his own poetic problem, rather than representing him as a person.

'Once I could meet with them on every side;
But they have dwindled long by slow decay;
Yet still I persevere, and find them where I may.'¹³²

In the context of the poem, the lines Wordsworth quotes refer to at least two things. First, literally to the occupation in which the Old Man labors, gathering leeches for sale in medical use. And second, figuratively, to the subject of the poem—the up and down of dejection and delight in the life of the poet. Wordsworth worried that his own once ecstatic youth had transformed into a disenchanted adulthood. "We Poets in our youth begin in gladness;/But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness."¹³³ Whereas vision and delight used to be, as leeches used to be, findable on every side, now they are scarce. Nonetheless, like the Leech-gatherer, the poet may "persevere, and find them where I may." This puts the easy moral suggested by the ending of the poem in a different, darker light. The poet's recovery from dejection does not lead him back to his ecstatic youth, but analogizes his situation to what is in fact not an easy occupation. Leech-gatherers, after all, stand in ponds waiting for leeches to suck their blood.

Third, the speaker himself suggests in the last stanza that his expectations about the man had rendered it difficult for him to see the man truly. Thus: "I could have laughed myself to scorn." The laughter is inspired by the speaker's realization that he had let his expectations about the Old Man determine what he saw—perhaps the body bent double in pain or sickness—rather than seeing the Old Man as he was: decrepit, yet nonetheless firm of mind. This feature of the poem thematizes the problem with which I am occupied – the way in which romantic idealizations fail to do justice to their subjects. This shows how the literary tradition itself may be read as a struggle with one of its greatest temptations: to flatten the subject it admires.

¹³² Lines 127-133.

¹³³ Lines 48-49.

Like Wordsworth, Thoreau thought there were important lessons to be learned from nature and from people who lived close to nature and worked in rural occupations. For the most part, Thoreau's project in *Walden* was, in contrast to Wordsworth's, to create a world in which Thoreau was himself the country worker, rather than—as Wordsworth's poems usually did—watching and describing those who worked in rural occupations.¹³⁴ Thoreau aimed to become one of those who Wordsworth might have represented.

This effort to join rural labor may have led Thoreau to a subtler treatment of other inhabitants of the woods. Unlike Wordsworth's account of the Old Man, in which the man provides a relatively tidy moral for the poet, Thoreau insisted on ambivalence in his portrait of the Canadian woodchopper. I read this portrait as a critical response to Wordsworth's representation of the Leech-gatherer. Thoreau wrote in his journal in 1859, "There are poets of all kinds and degrees, little known to each other. The Lake School is not the only or the principal one."¹³⁵ Thoreau both admired the achievements of the Lake District poets and ambitiously aimed to supersede them. Wordsworth's fascination with common speech and ordinary life enabled Thoreau to work with even more complex images, images that aimed at an even more faithful representation of "humble and rustic life."

Whereas the caricature of Thoreau has him insistently avoiding social contact, especially in the years recounted in *Walden*, he recorded interactions with many visitors while living in the

¹³⁴ Weisbuch puts the point succinctly: "Thoreau enacts what Wordsworth contemplates." Robert Weisbuch, *Atlantic Double-Cross: American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 146.

¹³⁵ Henry David Thoreau, *Journal: July 2, 1858-February 28, 1859*, ed. Bradford Torrey, The Writings of Henry David Thoreau (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1906), 423. The lines that follow the quote are: "They love various things. Some love beauty, and some love rum. Some go to Rome, and some go a-fishing, and are sent to the house of correction once a month. They keep up their fires by means unknown to me. I know not their comings and goings." "I know not" is an important marker of Thoreau's insistence on his own unknowing.

woods. The woodchopper was a new friend Thoreau made, just a little more than a week after moving to the woods. They read Homer together, with Thoreau translating.¹³⁶

The portrait of the woodchopper occupies the center of "Visitors," the sixth chapter of *Walden*. It begins by describing a man "who should come to my lodge this morning," "a Canadian, a woodchopper and post-maker, who can hole fifty posts in a day, who made his last supper on a woodchuck which his dog caught" (VI, 8). Beginning with this allusion to the Last Supper, which analogizes the woodchopper to Christ, but in a very strange way, Thoreau's description of the woodchopper proceeds through another eight paragraphs. From the first sentence until its conclusion, the portrait of the Canadian woodchopper takes up nearly half of the chapter in which it appears. It is the longest description of any single person besides Thoreau himself in *Walden*.

The title of the chapter in which the woodchopper appears enacts the switch in subject position that Thoreau made with respect to Wordsworth. Thoreau received visitors in the woods, rather than visiting those who lived there. In "Resolution and Independence," Wordsworth comes upon the man on the moor and then returns home with a lesson in delight. In "Visitors," Thoreau

¹³⁶ Thoreau leaves the woodchopper purposefully unnamed in *Walden*, writing, "he had so suitable and poetic a name that I am sorry I cannot print it here." Readers of the *Journal* can recognize most of the material as having evolved from descriptions of Thoreau's relationship with Alek Therien. Leonard Neufeldt argued that the woodchopper portrait was also influenced by material about an encounter Thoreau had with another man, Tom Fowler, on his excursion to Mount Katahdin. Leonard N. Neufeldt, "The Making of Alek Therien: Journal Antecedents of Therien As Literary Character," *The Concord Saunterer* 12, no. 2 (1977): 12–14. It is certainly likely that Thoreau's conversations with other men informed his treatment of the Therien material and the ensuing portrait of the woodchopper. And the woodchopper portrait, like the rest of *Walden*, is purposefully mythologized. I am less convinced than Neufeldt that the notes on conversation with Tom Fowler were decisive in the composition of the woodchopper portrait. But many recent interpreters are not very careful about maintaining the distance between the woodchopper of *Walden* and Alek Therien of Walden Pond. Like Neufeldt, I purposefully maintain this distance out of respect for the mythological form Thoreau chose in the writing of *Walden*. Two examples of interpreters who call the woodchopper of *Walden* "Alek Therien" are Philip Cafaro, *Thoreau's Living Ethics: Walden and the Pursuit of Virtue* (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 2004); Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness*.

is the one living outside of town, receiving visitors who come and go. Thoreau had written, in the paragraph before the woodchopper appears,

I had more visitors while I lived in the woods than at any other period of my life; I mean that I had some. I met several there under more favorable circumstances than I could any where else. But fewer came to see me upon trivial business. (VI, 7)

In the woods Thoreau had more visitors than ever. The phrase, "I mean that I had some," suggests that by "more visitors" Thoreau means not necessarily that he had more visitors in number, but instead that he had more true visitors in some implicit sense. Perhaps he had more visitors who came for a real visit, rather than to transact "trivial business." His circumstances in the woods were more conducive to true visiting. Ironically perhaps, these conditions – a mile from town, "–no gate–no front-yard,–and no path to the civilized world!" – make social life better (IV, 21).

Thoreau describes the woodchopper as having extraordinary skills. He once knew how to read the Greek of the New Testament, and he speaks both English and "Canadian French." He is also an accomplished laborer—he "can hole fifty posts in a day"—and he is artful when he chops wood, for he "indulged in some flourishes and ornaments in his art" (VI, 8-9). He also made the stumps he left behind level to the ground so that they would not impede sleds. He lives well in the woods, on woodchuck, pigeon, rabbits, and partridges. These are skills Thoreau admired. On top of all these skills, despite them, the woodchopper was "simply and naturally humble" (VI, 11).

The woodchopper's humility may be related to his position as a visitor. The woodchopper's appearance in the chapter on "Visitors" suggests his arrival is a visitation. The visit called by Christians "The Visitation" also recalls simple humility. In Luke 1:39-56, Mary goes to visit

Elizabeth. The speeches made in this visit have become two prominent Christian prayers.

Elizabeth's greeting is quoted in the Hail Mary. Mary's response to Elizabeth has come down as the Magnificat, recited regularly in the daily patterns of monastic prayer: "And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord...He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree." In this part of the Magnificat, Mary – symbol of humility in the Christian world – echoes one of the themes of the Hebrew prophets, in which present hierarchies are turned on their heads. The high are made low, and the lowly are exalted.

Thoreau takes up this prophetic theme in which the high are made low and the low are made high in "Visitors" more than once. "Half-witted men from the almshouse and elsewhere came to see me...I found some of them to be wiser than the so called *overseers* of the poor and selectmen of the town, and thought it was time that the tables were turned" (VI, 15). There was one "simple-minded pauper" in particular who Thoreau thought achieved exaltation through humility. In their conversation, the pauper tells Thoreau that he is "deficient in intellect." Thoreau has those words in quotation marks, spoken by the pauper. The pauper impresses Thoreau in his capacity for truth telling: "it was so simple and sincere and so true all that he said. And, true enough, in proportion as he appeared to humble himself he was exalted" (VI, 15). The humility of the characters in "Visitors" contributes to their capacity for truth.

Perhaps because of his humility, then, the woodchopper is a fine philosopher and an excellent interpreter of contemporary politics. Thoreau describes conversations he and the woodchopper had about "the various reforms of the day" (VI, 13). These are topics that recur throughout *Walden*, as Thoreau's concerns about contemporary economy are combined with his dislike for the way many reformers approached the subject. The woodchopper was a common sense reformer in the same mode as Thoreau.

He never failed to look at [the various reforms of the day] in the most simple and practical light. He had never heard of such things before. Could he do without factories? I asked. He had worn the home-made Vermont gray, he said, and that was good. Could he dispense with tea and coffee? Did this country afford any beverage beside water? He had soaked hemlock leaves in water and drank it, and thought that was better than water in warm weather. (VI, 13)

Thoreau himself was concerned with the conditions of the factories, and in the beginning of *Walden* suggests that one reason to wear simple clothes and avoid buying new ones is because the conditions of the workers in the factories are bad. Similarly, it was common among abolitionists to abstain from tea and coffee, since they were associated with slave labor. The woodchopper here provides positive reasons for abstentions Thoreau endorsed: the gray fabric produced in homes in Vermont is *good* – no need for factories. Hemlock in water is *better* than plain – why import other beverages?

This is the shape of reasoning that Thoreau employs in *Walden*: while following many reformist lines, he explains them differently from how other reformers usually did. Centrally, Thoreau insisted there was positive value – true good – in what could look like merely negative renunciation. Thoreau sought not merely to reject the evils other reformers did, but also to embrace the goods such renunciation allowed. In this way, the woodchopper reflects Thoreau's own aims – to do philosophy that was attached to the world, the things in it, and the relationships among us, and especially that emphasized the goods philosophy pursued. The woodchopper, Thoreau writes, "could defend many institutions better than any philosopher, because, in describing them as they concerned him, he gave the true reason for their prevalence, and speculation had not suggested to him any other" (VI, 13). Because of his humility and simplicity,

the woodchopper avoids the temptation to speculation. This means he has virtues some so-called philosophers lack, virtues that enable his capacity for truth.

The woodchopper is also good at being happy, which made Thoreau admire him. Thoreau had announced his purpose for *Walden* even before its first chapter began in an epigraph that he authored: "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." In the literary history to which Thoreau was heir, the line was purposefully contrary. It set itself against Coleridge's famous "Dejection: an Ode," which had been – in turn – a response to Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence." Both poems depicted poetic dejection, a feeling of despair that made the enjoyment of life and nature extremely difficult. They saw it as deeply related to the life of poetry, and in many cases a problem brought on by distance in time from ecstatic experience.

Thoreau's purpose as set out in the epigraph, to brag lustily rather than hymn dejection, is partly inspired by what he – like Wordsworth and Coleridge – took to be the difficulty of the effort to brag lustily, both for Thoreau himself and for the audience he imagines for the book. While interpreters have often taken Thoreau to be self-obsessed, the epigraph suggests that the bragging did not come naturally to Thoreau, but was an effort to keep dejection at bay.

The woodchopper is particularly inspiring to Thoreau in the ease and purity with which he seemed to achieve happiness. As the Leech-gatherer had helped Wordsworth overcome dejection, the woodchopper helps Thoreau: he provides an example of one who lives, for the most part, happily. "He interested me because he was so quiet and solitary and so happy withal; a well of good humor and contentment which overflowed at his eyes. His mirth was without alloy" (VI, 10). To the extent that the woodchopper offers a window into another mode of life, one less

burdened by the imprisonment of self-regarding opinion and its accompanying dejection, the woodchopper plays a role for Thoreau somewhat similar to Wordsworth's Leech-gatherer.

But unlike Wordsworth's Old Man – and many of Wordsworth's other sages – Thoreau's description of the woodchopper is multivalent. Thoreau does not see only an inspiring image in the woodchopper; he is admirable, but he is no sage. In fact, Thoreau's portrait of him is deeply ambivalent, and in this sense human. Thoreau described him in ways that demonstrate admiration for him. But Thoreau sees flaws in him, too.

Thoreau writes that while the woodchopper was well-developed as an animal man, "the intellectual and what is called spiritual man in him were slumbering as an infant." He was educated "in that innocent and ineffectual way in which the Catholic priests teach the aborigines," educated to remain as a child – to revere "wiser men": writers and preachers. "He was so genuine and unsophisticated that no introduction would serve to introduce him, more than if you introduced a woodchuck to your neighbor (VI, 11)." Here, Thoreau's insistence on the woodchopper's animal nature shades into ambivalence and could even be read as denigration. True, Thoreau admired children and animals, the two images for the woodchopper most often used in this paragraph. (And he also introduced his neighbors to woodchucks.) But for Thoreau, true philosophy and poetry require engagement with spiritual and intellectual life. "Yet I never, by any manœuvring, could get him to take the spiritual view of things; the highest that he appeared to conceive of was a simple expediency, such as you might expect an animal to appreciate" (VI, 13).¹³⁷ The woodchopper is not "spiritual."

¹³⁷ And yet, look at the key word "maneuvering." The term is ambivalent in the larger context of Thoreau's writings. Maneuvering suggests manipulation, and Emerson had been disdainful of "manipular attempts to realize the world of thought" in "Experience." Emerson, *Ralph Waldo*

While these features of the portrait of the woodchopper might seem to condescend, in that they suggest Thoreau is above the woodchopper intellectually and spiritually, I think these features respond to the sense that Wordsworth's poetry falls short of treating its subjects as whole persons, a sense Thoreau may have had that Wordsworth's sages represent a condescending idealization of country people. In this way, Thoreau may demonstrate his concern with the risks I have been suggesting are native to pastoral literature when it describes people it admires for their closeness to nature: that it may flatten them. Thoreau's mixed descriptions of the woodchopper aim to show him honestly, to avoid papering over his life for the sake of a tidy moral.

I have described what Thoreau saw as the woodchopper's virtues and his shortcomings, but the ambivalence in the portrait of the woodchopper exists not only at the level of his individual character traits. The ambivalence Thoreau tries to evoke runs also into the terms he uses to describe the woodchopper. Many of the woodchopper's traits are neither virtues nor vices. Most dramatically, Thoreau insists on his own unknowing about the woodchopper's character.

With respect to Thoreau's terminological ambivalence, the last sentence of the paragraph before the introduction of the woodchopper includes a key term of ambivalence for Thoreau: *cultivation*.

I had more visitors while I lived in the woods than at any other period of my life; I mean that I had some. I met several there under more favorable circumstances than I could anywhere else. But fewer came to see me upon trivial business. In this respect, my company was winnowed by my mere distance from town. I had withdrawn so far within the great ocean of solitude, into which the rivers of society empty, that for the most part, so far as my needs were concerned, only the finest sediment was deposited around me. Beside,

Emerson, 492. Thoreau's description of his attempts to maneuver the woodchopper should make us wonder whether such maneuvering is itself unspiritual.

there were wafted to me evidences of unexplored and uncultivated continents on the other side. (VI, 7)

One of the benefits Thoreau found in withdrawing into "the great ocean of solitude" was that there he found evidence of uncultivated continents on the other side. But for Thoreau, cultivation – like civilization – is a polyvalent term.

'Cultivation' is always a double entendre, in that cultivation refers both to what humans do to soil and what they do to their own selves. This was a double entendre that Thoreau likely adopted from agricultural reform movements of the period.¹³⁸ This double meaning is at play throughout three different moods in which Thoreau uses 'cultivation' and its related terms.

First, 'cultivation' sometimes expresses the ancient sense in which the nurturing required for healthy agriculture is a metaphor for that required for virtue. We cultivate ourselves as we do the soil to make our selves better, our souls more conducive to good growth. The end of *Walden* recommends: "Cultivate poverty like a garden herb, like sage. Do not trouble yourself much to get new things, whether clothes or friends. Turn the old; return to them." In this, the cultivation of herbs is a metaphor for the cultivation of poverty; cultivating poverty by not getting new things will yield sage, as cultivating a kitchen herb garden also does.

But, second, in contrast to the first mood in which cultivation yields good, Thoreau is also concerned that what we sometimes call cultivation and civilization is actually working against our better natures. Of the native "ground-nut," "the potato of the aborigines, a sort of fabulous

¹³⁸ *The Cultivator*, a widely circulated agricultural periodical published by Jesse Buel out of Albany, NY, was an outlet for Buel's ideas about agricultural reform. Such agricultural periodicals were published in many places in the U.S.; Buel's was the most famous. There was also a *Boston Cultivator* (1839-1850). Publishers put out compilations in collected volumes. One such compilation, of Buel's *Cultivator* and *The Genesee Farmer*, published in 1842, stated on the title page that it was "designed to improve the soil and the mind, and to elevate the character and standing of the cultivators of the American soil." Willis Gaylord and Luther Tucker, eds., *The Cultivator: A Consolidation of Buel's Cultivator and The Genesee Farmer*, vol. IX (Albany, NY: Luther Tucker, 1842).

fruit," Thoreau wrote, "Cultivation has well-nigh exterminated it." What is called cultivation can work against native virtues. In this sense, Thoreau sometimes uses cultivation pejoratively, as that which people aim at while they are mistaken about what true goods are. Cultivation in this sense undermines another of Thoreau's central values: wildness.

Third, Thoreau writes, we are too inclined to forget that the cultivated and the uncultivated are not categorically different from one another. Both cultivated and wild belong to the same world, and in this sense have more in common than we often notice. "We are wont to forget that the sun looks on our cultivated fields and on the prairies and forests without distinction. They all reflect and absorb his rays alike." This third sense seeks to reconcile the first two; Thoreau aimed to get the best out of both cultivation and wildness, while remembering that the distinction between them was never ultimate. Thoreau's introduction of the woodchopper as "evidence of" "uncultivated continents" therefore further complicates the portrait, in that what the reader should take as the meaning of "uncultivated" is not transparent.

In addition to the use of terminological ambivalence—for example the use of the term uncultivated in the polyvalent sense I have described—Thoreau makes the woodchopper's portrait even more complex as it goes along, by explicitly denying the reader a final explanation of the woodchopper's meaning. The portrait ends by invoking the image of muddy water as a metaphor for men "in the lowest grades of life." The image echoes the mud in which Wordsworth came upon the Leech-gatherer, but gives the metaphor a new meaning, not as the difficult place the poet searches for delight, but as the elusive aspect of human character.

[The woodchopper] suggested that there might be men of genius in the lowest grades of life, however permanently humble and illiterate, who take their own view always, or do not

pretend to see at all; who are as bottomless even as Walden Pond was thought to be, though they may be dark and muddy. (VI, 14)

Once again, this image partakes in the positional imagery of the prophetic theme in the chapter by suggesting that those in the "lowest grades of life" may be "men of genius." In addition, those who are "dark and muddy" might be thought to be that because of their social standing or any number of other reasons, but the image of a bottomless muddy pond also suggests that knowledge about the character of "men" is elusive; we cannot see their bottoms. This, in turn, may be further effort on Thoreau's part to avoid reducing the woodchopper to a type.

The woodchopper is not any one thing, not even any one contrast. He is a true philosopher but he is not spiritual. He lives wild, but re-originate many of the institutions of society. He is a person with contradictions, neither idealized nor reviled. In the passage I take to be a key to the portrait, Thoreau suggests that—given the woodchopper's complexity—Thoreau did not know what to make of him. In this, Thoreau exhibits the humility he admired in the woodchopper.

To a stranger he appeared to know nothing of things in general; yet I sometimes saw in him a man whom I had not seen before, and I did not know whether he was as wise as Shakspeare or as simply ignorant as a child, whether to suspect him of a fine poetic consciousness or of stupidity. (VI, 12)

The line, "I did not know," is the key to Thoreau's ambivalent portrait. He had written in his journal in April 1852, after reading about a painter who depicted all four sides of a figure in one painting by surrounding it with reflections, "So I would fain represent some truths as roundly and

solidly...so that you may see round them."¹³⁹ Thoreau's habit was to aim in his writing to show all the parts, not to resolve them into a single image.¹⁴⁰

As I mentioned at the start, one important part of contemporary scholarship on religion and ecology brings the stories of nature and people who live close to it to the halls of power. I myself have undertaken ethnographic work that examined ecological harms faced by rural people; I admire all who do such work. But one problem with this project, insofar as it consists in giving voice to others, is that we may flatten those others and their voices, precisely in our effort to speak for them and of their world. Troublingly, and as the romantics show, this may be especially true in our representations of others we most admire. When our representations flatten that which they describe it constitutes a double erasure. To take one example, the United States systematically stole land from and perpetrated mass murder of Native American communities. And yet now, all too often the complex histories of the native societies of the Americas are flattened in naive appeals to their more ecological ways of living. First there was colonization and annihilation. Now there is erasure through tidy piety.

In this context, the tradition of struggle with this problem that I have uncovered in these two examples from Wordsworth and Thoreau can inform our thinking about how to carry on representing others in spite of the dangers associated with the project. In my view, Thoreau does better than Wordsworth had in representing "humble and rustic life." First, he makes his judgments about the woodchopper explicit rather than leaving them implicit. This makes them subject to our criticism (and his own) in a way Wordsworth's implicit assumptions about the

¹³⁹ Quoted in Howarth, *The Book of Concord*, 76.

¹⁴⁰ Some interpreters argue for this reason that Thoreau's Journal is his masterwork, and the form of literary production that he preferred. In a journal, thoughts keep moving, changing. In a published work, they are fixed. Thoreau always had an ambivalent relationship to publication

Leech-gatherer are not. Further, though Thoreau articulates his judgments and offers justifications for them, in many cases the very terms used in his descriptions of the woodchopper express ambivalence. Finally, Thoreau explicitly acknowledges a final ambivalence in his judgments.

My sense is that the problems associated with the representation of "humble and rustic life," are not avoidable, though we must try to minimize them; they are part of what it means to be us. We are the kind of beings who love, and whose love will sometimes make us blind, even – perhaps especially – to the things we love. Our awareness of these temptations, our willingness to see those who came before us as also subject to these temptations, to see the ways they acknowledged and fought and failed to overcome but nonetheless did good in the face of these temptations, will enable our own pursuits to do justice for all.

Though as writers we always risk getting it wrong – doing our subjects injustice in the stories we tell about them – we must continue to write. To let this problem silence us would be a dereliction of our obligation to advocate as we can on behalf of those who face the most dire outcomes of industrialization's overreach. We just have to do the best we can.

You will recall that Thoreau wrote of the woodchopper, "He was so genuine and unsophisticated that no introduction would serve to introduce him, more than if you introduced a woodchuck to your neighbor." Then he went on, "He had got to find him out as you did. He would not play any part" (VI, 11). The woodchopper, Thoreau meant, would not be reduced to a player in a drama. He would not be the moral of a romantic story. "He would not play any part." To bring our subjects to life, to let them live even as they necessarily also play a part in our own story, is what our writing about a suffering world should do. Writing all of the complexities may be

impossible, but getting life onto the page can be our aim. The tradition of pastoral literature gives us most when it does this, when it shows us and helps us think about the living, growing, dying, loving, suffering world.

Chapter 6 – Delight in True Goods

Philosophers are broken-down poets.

Thoreau, as quoted in Emerson's journal, September 1845¹⁴¹

As I pointed out in Chapter Four, Thoreau evidently knew enough about the history of Christian monasticism to make a few jokes about it in *Walden*. These jokes pose an interesting question of interpretation, and one that no interpreter of *Walden* can avoid. What are we to make of Thoreau's playful writing?¹⁴² Thoreau's friend Ellery Channing wrote a biography of Thoreau; the epigraph to its first chapter read, "'Wit is the Soul's powder.' – Davenant."¹⁴³ Thoreau's sense of irony and humor run deep in his writing, and we must wonder what to make of them. The specific case of those references to medieval Christianity is not only an important subject in the study of Thoreau's asceticism, but also an excellent test case for our reading of Thoreau's ironic spirit more broadly. Should we take those jokes as playful endorsements of the figures they poke fun at? Or are they dismissive jabs?

Another early biography, that of Edward Emerson, suggested that readers often mistook Thoreau's jokes for earnestness, because readers had not met him in person and therefore didn't understand him. "Thoreau had the humour which often goes with humanity. It crops out slyly in

¹⁴¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, with Annotations*, vol. 7 (New York: Houghton Mifflin company, 1914), 99.

¹⁴² Richard Rorty said it was Plato's jokes that made him so interesting. "The permanent fascination of the man who dreamed up the whole idea of western philosophy – Plato – is that we still do not know which sort of philosopher he was. Even if the *Seventh Letter* is set aside as spurious, the fact that after millenniums of commentary nobody knows which passages in the dialogues are jokes keeps the puzzle fresh." Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton University Press, 1980), 369n15.

¹⁴³ William Ellery Channing, *Thoreau: The Poet-Naturalist: With Memorial Verses* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1873), 1.

all his writings, but sometimes is taken for dead earnest because the reader did not know the man."¹⁴⁴

The extent of Thoreau's humor is a key question in the interpretation of Thoreau's ascetic practice because readers have not always seen Thoreau's simplicity as salutary. Many critics have viewed him as promoting a form of selfish American individualism, a pull yourself up by your bootstraps Protestant Ethic, while also not really living up to it – his mother did his laundry, right? This view often coincides with an interpretation of Thoreau as lacking all humor. Robert Louis Stevenson was an early critic of Thoreau in this vein. He wrote in 1880 what would become a standard critique. Among Stevenson's complaints about Thoreau was that he didn't know how to enjoy life. Stevenson wrote, "his enjoyment was hardly smiling, or the smile was not broad enough to be convincing."¹⁴⁵ Stevenson himself came around (especially after learning the full extent of Thoreau's aid to enslaved people on the run). But Stevenson's view has been popular enough for long enough that a recent takedown of Thoreau in the *New Yorker* was incredulous that he has become an American hero. His abstinence was a particular affront to that author. She wrote, "I cannot idolize anyone who opposes coffee."¹⁴⁶ Of course, as she neglected to mention, avoiding coffee was a popular practice among abolitionists, who worried that their own consumption would support slave labor. But for many critics, this ethical rationale doesn't excuse Thoreau's overzealous rejection of pleasure; they maintain that Thoreau was a dour naysayer who didn't know how to enjoy the good.

Thoreau does sometimes come off as dour in his thoroughgoing rejection of material goods that others enjoy. He wrote in *Walden*, "Most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts

¹⁴⁴ Emerson, *Henry Thoreau: As Remembered by a Young Friend*, 85.

¹⁴⁵ Robert Louis Stevenson, "Henry David Thoreau: His Character and Opinions.," ed. Leslie Stephen, *The Cornhill Magazine* 41, no. 246 (June 1880): 665.

¹⁴⁶ Kathryn Schulz, "Pond Scum," *The New Yorker*, October 19, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/10/19/pond-scum>.

of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hinderances to the elevation of mankind" (I, 19). Luxury, and even comfort, was not only unnecessary, and therefore avoidable, but it was also positively harmful. This came out most vividly in the chapter called "Higher Laws," which many readers have read as the apex of Thoreau's preachy rejection. There Thoreau addresses food gathering practices, especially fishing and hunting. He praises vegetarianism, and chastity as a virtue. He writes, "Put an extra condiment into your dish and it will poison you" (XI, 6).

This rejection of comfort and pleasure informed the basic message of *Walden*, which was – as Thoreau put it in its tersest form – Simplify, simplify, simplify. This was the key to true philosophy for Thoreau. He sometimes seems to say you can't be good without giving up attachment to the very things you love.

This coincides with a popular view that asceticism consists in deprivation through which the ascetic grows in holiness, and we are not people inclined to think deprivation is good. So the suspicion becomes that Thoreau romanticized poverty, which *would be* deeply problematic. Romantic representations of poverty can excuse and even find good in the suffering of others, which is an injustice. In his renunciations, we may suspect Thoreau demonstrates a particular vice of the comfortable. He was never so poor that he had to be truly hungry, and then he recommended meager meals. Those among us who have actually been hungry might take offense.

But asceticism is not unwilling deprivation, which is so often harmful. Many ascetics, and I think Thoreau is among them, have been women and men who renounced money, sensual pleasures, or power not out of self-denial but because they already had more than they needed, and active renunciation enabled them to value rightly and relate justly to the things that remained. Thoreau insisted that the right kind of poverty was "voluntary" after all. This

voluntary poverty was not basically a rejection of good things, though it did require some renunciation. It was more basically oriented to the pleasure found *within* renunciation, delight that was made possible in his view *by* the asceticism he practiced.

But still, it seems difficult to hold together the deep earnestness of "Higher Laws" with the scatological humor and other jokes and wordplay that fill the pages of *Walden*. How can we reconcile the one to the other? My sense is that Thoreau thought that writing ought to be both earnest and playful. On the one hand, it was intended to promote a particular theological and ethical view, that simplicity yields appropriate gratitude for life, and gratitude yields praise. This was its earnest message. On the other hand, through his playful style and refusal of dogmatism, Thoreau also acknowledged that praise without play is vacuous, just as work *or* play without praise is empty.

higher laws

"Higher Laws" begins with a scene from everyday life, as least as such life played out in Walden Woods: Thoreau coming home through the woods in the dark. He had been fishing, and was bringing the fish he had caught with him on a string, and carrying his pole. Then, "I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across my path, and felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw; not that I was hungry then, except for that wildness which he represented" (XI, 1). The encounter with the woodchuck, who inspires a "savage delight" and "tempted" Thoreau to devour wildness, opens a chapter that treats fishing, hunting, eating, and sensuality broadly.

But the chapter seems to pull in opposite directions. The "savage delight" that was inspired by the woodchuck is held against another pole. "I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive

rank and savage one, and I reverence them both." Thoreau aims to puzzle the reader, by reverencing opposites. The first half of the sentence sets up a comparison, and by using the words 'higher' and 'spiritual' over against 'primitive,' 'rank,' and 'savage,' aims to tempt the reader to prefer the first. But the sudden end of the sentence, "and I reverence them both," makes clear that such a judgment would be submission to temptation. The following sentence reiterates Thoreau's insistence that spiritual life does not have greater value than savage life: "I love the wild not less than the good" (XI, 1). In general, people think of Thoreau as enamored of wildness. He wrote, in the famous essay "Walking," "what I have been preparing to say is, that in wildness is the preservation of the world."¹⁴⁷ But his view in "Higher Laws" is not so straightforward. 'Nature' is both the thing with which we should want to have acquaintance, and that which must be overcome.

He refuses to resolve the tension. On the one hand, the chapter glorifies what it calls savage life. "I like sometimes to take rank hold on life and spend my day more as the animals do" (XI, 1). And it suggests that hunting and fishing are some of the best ways of coming to know "Nature."

Fishermen, hunters, woodchoppers, and others, spending their lives in the fields and woods, in a peculiar sense a part of Nature themselves, are often in a more favorable mood for observing her, in the intervals of their pursuits, than philosophers or poets even, who approach her with expectation. She is not afraid to exhibit herself to them. (XI, 1)

In this sense, those who spend their time in the woods for economic reasons are closer to Nature even than those who purposefully reverence her.

¹⁴⁷ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 2008), 273.

But on the other hand, the chapter recommends many forms of restraint *against* animal instinct, especially with respect to food practices. "I believe that every man who has ever been earnest to preserve his higher or poetic faculties in the best condition has been particularly inclined to abstain from animal food, and from much food of any kind" (XI, 5). Thoreau's motivation for vegetarianism seems to be that the killing of animals is "a miserable way" (XI, 6). Thoreau liked to fish, indeed had "a certain instinct for it," but "I have found repeatedly, of late years, that I cannot fish without falling a little in self-respect" (XI, 5). The human carnivorous habit is a reproach. "I have no doubt that it is part of the destiny of the human race, in its gradual improvement, to leave off eating animals, as surely as the savage tribes have left off eating each other when they came into contact with the more civilized" (XI, 6). The discourse on food began with some ambivalence. It ends with the conclusion that human improvement will necessarily yield vegetarianism.

Refusing meat is just the beginning of Thoreau's discourse on the benefits of purity. The last five paragraphs of the chapter are especially condemnatory of the animal part of the human.

We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly expelled; like the worms which, even in life and health, occupy our bodies. Possible we may withdraw from it, but never change its nature. I fear that it may enjoy a certain health of its own; that we may be well, yet not pure. (XI, 11)

Unlike in the beginning of the chapter, when the wild and the good were equally revered, in this quotation, the animal nature is opposed to the higher nature and purity has become an ideal.

The stark terms in which Thoreau chastises the physical has led even sympathetic readers to view "Higher Laws" as the worst of Thoreau's alignment of physical and spiritual practice.

Edward Abbey wrote of his own food practices:

Scrambled eggs, bacon, green chiles for breakfast, with hot *salsa*, toasted tortillas, and leftover baked potatoes sliced and fried. A gallon or two of coffee, tea and – for me – the usual breakfast beer. Henry would not have approved of this gourmandising. To hell with him. I do not approve of his fastidious puritanism. For one who claims to crave nothing but reality, he frets too much about *purity*. Purity, purity, he preaches, in the most unctuous of his many sermons, a chapter of *Walden* called "Higher Laws."¹⁴⁸

The accusation is that in "Higher Laws" Thoreau succumbed to "fastidious puritanism" that insisted above all on purity. Thoreau did write in praise of purity, and chastity for that matter – that ancient Christian virtue whose meaning is now so little discussed. But Thoreau also suggested that Christian practice was generally insufficient to the achievement of purity.

If you would avoid uncleanness, and all the sins, work earnestly, though it be at cleaning a stable. Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome. What avails it that you are Christian, if you are not purer than the heathen, if you deny yourself no more, if you are not more religious? I know of many systems of religion esteemed heathenish whose precepts fill the reader with shame, and provoke him to new endeavors, though it be to the performance of rites merely. (XI, 12)

Many interpreters are put off by the traditional language of chastity and purity, and view Thoreau as motivated by prudishness. [Some readers of "Higher Laws" have noticed a line from an unpublished draft that makes mention of sexual practice. They take this reference to sexuality

¹⁴⁸ Edward Abbey, "Down the River with Henry Thoreau," in *Down the River* (New York, N.Y.: Plume, 1991), 8.

as evidence that Thoreau himself struggled to remain sexually pure, in some sense. And they therefore conclude that he was referring in these pages to an effort to abstain from sexual activity.] Of course, we know little about the sexual lives of history. We know so little about the sexual lives of the present. Privacy is a human good. But I think it is important to take note of the fact that Thoreau excised that line in particular. It seems to me possible to interpret its excision as the effort on Thoreau's part to leave the content of chastity and purity more indeterminate than people usually read them.

Of course, in "Higher Laws" Thoreau was very explicit about his view that humans would, with moral progress, leave off eating animals. But, as the chapter's beginning in the virtues of hunting and fishing indicates, this was a topic on which Thoreau was truly conflicted. If he were prescribing in "Higher Laws" some sort of rigid abstention from all pleasure, it would not match the rest of the text. Thoreau delights in sensual pleasures in much of the rest of the book, and he rarely expresses self-reproach. Some people find this off-putting, as if he were too big for his britches, but his general tendency to avoid self-accusation is of a piece with his insistence that the aim of the book is not to ode dejection but to brag lustily.

What should we make of the tension between, on the one hand Thoreau's seeming condemnation of sensual pleasure in "Higher Laws," and his attachment to lusty bragging?

The 'more' that true philosophy aims for in Thoreau's view, is a life lived pursuing wisdom. For Thoreau, this was a religious vocation to which he (and all humans) was called by his God. It included daily practice, indeed it entailed a sacral view of time and its seasons. It also called him to consider daily practices, like eating, dressing, housing, and working as caught up in his religious life. In the most rigorous articulation of this practice, "Higher Laws," some passages strike people as overly austere. I interpret the "chastity" and "purity" Thoreau describes there as

integral to the philosophy he articulates, but I insist that what chastity and purity look like is left purposefully indeterminate. Thoreau was not doctrinaire.

making the day sacred

Thoreau thought about days as basic units of human life. *Walden* is loosely structured around the passing of a year in Walden Woods. I call this the book's annual structure. It begins with Thoreau's building his house in the spring of 1845. He moves to the pond in the beginning of July, and passes the summer, fall, and winter in his small house there. The penultimate chapter of the book, "Spring," is about the breaking up of the ice in the ponds and "the coming in of spring." At the end of that chapter Thoreau writes, "Thus my first year's life in the woods completed; and the second year was similar to it" (XVII, 26). This narrative of a year frames the entire book.

But this major structural device of the book is not rigid, just as the form of the book is not entirely narrative. Throughout the book the narrator speaks from different moments in time, from outside of the year the book purports to be about. What he describes is sometimes taken from Thoreau's life in 1845-46, but he also includes stories and ideas from a second year Thoreau spent in the little house in 1846-47 and Thoreau's visits to the pond and the woods between when he moved back to the village in 1847 and when *Walden* was published in 1854.

This fact is not obscured by the text. In the place it is most obvious, Thoreau lists the spring dates on which Walden Pond was completely free of ice in '46, '47, '51, '52, '53, and '54, information he of course did not have in 1845-46 (XVII, 3). In another passage, the Thoreau of the 1854 publication comments on the text itself. He apologizes for the earlier author. "To speak critically, I never received more than one or two letters in my life – I wrote this some years ago – that were worth the postage" (II, 19). Within the dashes, the Thoreau of 1854 reflects back on the

Thoreau who had never received good letters. Here, I imagine, he wanted to let the reader (perhaps a particular correspondent such as Harrison Blake) know that in the period between the initial writing of the comment and the publication of the book the quality of the letters he received had changed. This is evidently something that happened outside the 1845-46 frame of the book. Thus, while the annual device is sometimes deployed straightforwardly, as though telling the story as it unfolded, at other times the author reflects back on the narrative, or intervenes in it from the present, and the annual device breaks open.

I am interested in the annual structure and the ways in which Thoreau often breaks it because the annual device is closely related to the theme of renewal, one of the major subjects of the book. The book ends in "Spring" for a reason. The images of the reawakening of life in spring – the breaking up of the ice, the return of birds, the greening of the grass – show the sense in which Thoreau thinks his readers can themselves experience spiritual renewal, which Thoreau intends to encourage with the book. "In a pleasant spring morning all men's sins are forgiven. Such a day is truce to vice. While such a sun holds out to burn, the vilest sinner may return" (XVII, 19). The book ends in spring because it offers an image of pardon and renewal, the sort of reawakening to new life that Thoreau wants to encourage.

I am also interested in the annual structure because examination of it helps us open up Thoreau's understanding of time, which is related to his thinking about how we ought to pass our time, or his asceticism.

Both *Walden* and Thoreau's first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, are organized by structures of time. In the first book each chapter is titled for a day of the week, beginning with "Saturday." Cycles of time's passing play an important role in Thoreau's thinking. *Walden* is organized around the seasons of a year, and Thoreau explained that part of the reason

for the experiment at Walden was that he wanted to live close to the seasons. "While I enjoy the friendship of the seasons I trust that nothing can make life a burden to me" (V, 4). In *Walden* Thoreau also suggests that just as we live the year through its seasons, with each offering its own pleasures, so we live the day through its hours. The day carries with it the dynamics of the year, but on a smaller scale. "The day is the epitome of the year. The night is the winter, the morning and evening are the spring and fall, and the noon is the summer" (XVII, 2). Here, Thoreau takes the major organizing principle of the book and insists that it applies not only to life over the course of a year, but also to the unit of time we find closer to hand – the day.¹⁴⁹ He makes the spiritual dynamics of the whole year accessible every day. The book is organized around the passing of the year, but what it usually describes is the way Thoreau passed the days of that year. The day is the epitome of the year. It has seasons: "The morning, which is the most memorable season of the day, is the awakening hour." Here, he calls the *morning* a *season* of the day, conflating the two time frames. He continues,

Then there is least somnolence in us; and for an hour, at least, some part of us awakes which slumbers all the rest of the day and night. Little is to be expected of that day, if it can be called a day, to which we are not awakened by our Genius, but by the mechanical nudgings of some servitor, are not awakened by our own newly acquired force and aspirations from within, accompanied by the undulations of celestial music, instead of factory bells, and a fragrance filling the air—to a higher life than we fell asleep from; and thus the darkness bear its fruit, and prove itself to be good, no less than the light. That

¹⁴⁹ Melissa Lane has written that while Rousseau and Thoreau are utopian thinkers (as many have argued) in that they are invested in "the good city" – *upolia* – in their later works they also share an emphasis on what she calls "the good day" or *uhemeria*. As I say here, Thoreau's interest in the day is also evident in the earlier work of *Walden*. Melissa Lane, "Thoreau and Rousseau: Nature as Utopia," in *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Jack Turner (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 342.

man who does not believe that each day contains an earlier, more sacred, and auroral hour than he has yet profaned, has despaired of life, and is pursuing a descending and darkening way. (II, 15)

Thoreau invokes the mornings as moments when we are likely to be most capable of the sort of awakening he is aiming to promote.

In this vision of the day, each part has its place in the whole. Thoreau's insistence on the importance of the day and the marking of its parts – night, morning, evening, and noon – should encourage us to view him in a long tradition of thinking about time and its passage as spiritually significant.

Walden is richly descriptive, sometimes to the point of absurdity. There are whole paragraphs that describe what it is like to lie on your belly and look through the ice into Walden Pond. These passages draw attention to a central argument of the book, which is that if we will be wise, we must focus more closely on our everyday actions. In this, Thoreau takes what he knows of "Hindoo" practice to be exemplary.¹⁵⁰

Nothing was too trivial for the Hindoo lawgiver, however offensive it may be to modern taste. He teaches how to eat, drink, cohabit, void excrement and urine, and the like, elevating what is mean, and does not falsely excuse himself by calling these things trifles.

Every man is the builder of a temple, called his body, to the god he worships, after a style purely his own, nor can he get off by hammering marble instead. We are all sculptors and painters, and our material is our own flesh and blood and bones. (XI, 13-14)

¹⁵⁰ What he knew of the religious traditions of India was not minor. His personal library of Asian texts was one of the largest in his era. The superlative comes from Rosenblum, "Introduction," ix.

Thus for Thoreau, the things that we do – even and perhaps especially those things which modern taste takes to be "mean" – determine what kind of people we are to become, what sort of art we make with our lives and bodies. *Walden* is a hyper close account of his own doings – from the budget for his house (as cheaply made as possible), to the data he gathered when surveying the pond. He thought this kind of accounting could put character (whether good or ill) on display.¹⁵¹ As the pond can be measured in deep detail, our characters can be measured by our days. He wrote, "draw lines through the length and breadth of the aggregate of a man's particular daily behaviors and waves of life into his coves and inlets, and where they intersect will be the height or depth of his character" (XVI, 13). This goes some way to explaining why he makes the accounting of his days in such great detail. He hoped to survey his character.¹⁵²

thoreau's orientation to delight

Though many moments in *Walden* suggest that Thoreau was motivated by a negative response to luxury, and a rejection of the goods of common life, dwelling on this feature of his thought ignores passages that describe another, positive experience of renunciation. Thoreau can say in the same breath that too many condiments will poison you, and that living without luxury is pure pleasure. When we focus on the instances in which *he* rejects goods *we* enjoy, like coffee, we are likely to miss his basic orientation to delight.

¹⁵¹ It also left him subject to the critique that he was an "accountant of the spirit" as in Alan Harrington, *The Immortalist: An Approach to the Engineering of Man's Divinity* (Random House, 1969), 52. Quoted in Abbey, "Down the River with Henry Thoreau," 31.

¹⁵² Many others have hoped to survey his character too, and have found the measurement short. I'm not concerned with whether his character is good or bad, but what he takes the shape of a good day to be. I think it's interesting to notice, though, that many of the critiques of Thoreau were and are related to negative evaluations of his character. This seems to take for granted that he was right about how we come to know a person's character.

From the third paragraph of *Walden*, Thoreau took pains to distinguish his practices of simplicity from the popular view of punishing asceticism. He suggested that the *other* citizens of Concord practiced a painful form of penance, even more "incredible and astonishing" than those he had read about who practice bodily feats, like hanging upside down by their feet over fires. He drew this contrast because he knew that his abstemiousness might grate on his readers. He was himself troubled by the reforming spirit that surrounded him in the broader culture of the period. He wrote once in his journal, "I dont like people who are too good for this world."¹⁵³ And he worried that readers might get the wrong idea. Some of his friends apparently did. He wrote, "Some of my friends spoke as if I was coming to the woods on purpose to freeze myself" (XIII, 18).

Against this view – one he knew might tempt readers who were, he thought, already inclined to self-punishment – the text of *Walden* sparkles with accounts of the goods Thoreau enjoyed, the life that delighted him in the woods. His renunciations enabled him to live on less, and living on less provided its own blessings. He wrote,

Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise til noon, rapt in a revery, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house. (IV, 2)

On such occasions, he wrote, "I silently smiled at my incessant good fortune" (IV, 2).

Doing nothing, enjoying the sunshine after a bath, wasn't the only thing that delighted Thoreau about his life in the woods. Even a contemplative ascetic doesn't want to just sit all day. But everything about his life pleased him. He wrote, "My life itself was become my amusement

¹⁵³ Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Journal, Volume 1: 1837-1844*, 219.

and never ceased to be novel." This was true to such an extent that, as he wrote: "Housework was a pleasant pastime" (IV, 3).

Even in "Higher Laws," the chapter that seems most strictly to reject sensual pleasures, Thoreau insists that the success of the form of life he recommends can be tested by whether it provides joy.

If the day and the night are such that you greet them with joy, and life emits a fragrance like flowers and sweet-scented herbs, is more elastic, more starry, more immortal, – that is your success. All nature is your congratulation, and you have cause momentarily to bless yourself. (XI, 7)

It may seem a contradiction, but Thoreau simplified for positive gain; he thought the simple life he led enabled him to value the good around him rightly, to have a proper emotional response to the world, to delight in true goods.

The experience described in passages like these is, I think, interestingly different from wonder.¹⁵⁴ Thoreau did have experiences that inspired wonder, and he devoted more and more time to scientific observation of the natural world as his life went on, but wonder is not the only emotional experience he has in the natural world. Delight is different from wonder in that wonder classically refers to new experiences that usually cause puzzlement or awe. Delight is, rather, the recognition, sometimes sudden, of goodness – even where we least expect it, even in mundane repetitive practices, even in very dark days. Delight features centrally in my work both because we face deeply dark days, and because it is through this capacity for delight that

¹⁵⁴ Some recent work on wonder includes Philip Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998); Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder : The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Lisa H. Sideris, "The Secular and Religious Sources of Rachel Carson's Sense of Wonder," in *Rachel Carson: Legacy and Challenge* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008).

Thoreau recognizes simplicity's goodness. Though Thoreau rejected coffee, he delighted in drinking water. After all, the water of Walden Pond was of such cool crystalline purity, why spoil it? He wrote about the water of the pond, "It was as good when a week old as the day it was dipped, and had no taste of the pump" (IX, 13).

delight and moral motivation

There has been developing interest over the last few decades among both humanists and social scientists of the extent to which affective moral emotions – like guilt, anger, and sympathy – are integral to human rationality and motivate human behavior.¹⁵⁵ Emotions are integral to rationality in that they enable knowledge. Think of the way that anger is often how we begin to understand that there has been an injustice done. And emotions motivate human behavior as much as if not more than intellected reasons for action. Think of the way that fear will motivate you to grab a child who is crossing the street, without your thinking explicitly that the street is dangerous.

This recent wave of interest in affect in philosophy and psychology coincides with a more ancient view.¹⁵⁶ Augustine, the fifth century Christian bishop of Hippo, is famous for attention to human psychology.¹⁵⁷ He developed – as one important biographer put it - a "psychology of

¹⁵⁵ See, for examples from across disciplines: Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta, eds., *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* (University of Chicago Press, 2001); Philip Fisher, *The Vehement Passions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); June Price Tangney and Ronda L. Dearing, *Shame and Guilt* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2003).

¹⁵⁶ Martha Nussbaum is one contemporary expositor of the connection between ancient philosophy of the passions and the issues in contemporary philosophy and psychology of emotions. See especially Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁵⁷ Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2008); James Wetzel, *Augustine and the*

'delight.'"¹⁵⁸ His view was that humans are lovers, which is to say that we cannot help but love.

The most basic motivation of the human will – the thing that moves anyone to do anything – is delight, that is, enjoyment of what is loved. The key to living well, on this view, was ordering our loves according to the relative goodness of the beloved. This turned out to be unceasingly difficult, because humans notoriously love the wrong things and have to tutor our delight, so that it is in true goods, rather than false ones. But the basic insight was that delight in the beloved was what moved anyone to act.

In a 2009 essay in the journal *Ethics & The Environment* Carol Booth argued that environmental ethics needs a "motivational turn."¹⁵⁹ Booth pointed out that even those who express concern about environmental problems are unlikely to take pro-environmental action. What environmental ethics needs now, she argued, is to pay more attention to what actually motivates people to enact our moral concern. Booth was not alone. Widespread frustration with the seeming inefficacy of the field of environmental ethics has many of us wondering whether what we do – that is, read and write – does any actual good for the issues we care most about, for the flourishing of the places, and creatures, and plants, and human communities many of us aim to nurture. A motivational turn, Booth suggested, would refocus the work of environmental ethicists on what features of life move people to action.

In the last decade or so, much of the work on motivation and environment has focused on guilt. Some social scientists have discussed how moral emotions – especially guilt – might

Limits of Virtue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

¹⁵⁸ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 148. Quoted in Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 241.

¹⁵⁹ Carol Booth, "A Motivational Turn for Environmental Ethics," *Ethics & the Environment* 14, no. 1 (2009): 53–78.

motivate citizens to give up environmentally detrimental ways of life.¹⁶⁰ In environmental ethics, some have focused on the importance of guilt in motivating pro-environmental behavior, and some contemporary work on climate guilt and shame suggests that negative moral emotions can be an impediment to pro-environmental behavior and therefore need to be tended.¹⁶¹ But to the extent that these scholars have focused on negative moral emotions, they have underplayed a major feature of right human relationship to nature, which in its finest form includes not only guilt and shame at the wrongs we have committed but also, and more basically, positive emotional relationships with the world around us. We only ever feel guilt when we feel there has been a wrong, and we feel there has been a wrong when we see a good betrayed.

Given this situation, I think it should do us some good to recall that delight rather than shame or guilt motivated Thoreau, one of the canonized saints of the environmental movement. In a period when one of the major tension lines in popular environmental discourse is about what we can hope for with respect to the future of our life on earth, I think that conscientiously cultivating delight in present goods is one of our most basic obligations. It does not refer to the ultimate result of our environmental efforts but teaches us to take pleasure in more near term effects and to value rightly the goods among which we live.

the woodchopper's mirth

One of those goods, and one that was central to Thoreau's life, was good humor. You will recall from Chapter 5 that the woodchopper is most compelling and attractive in his good humor

¹⁶⁰ For an example, see Jonas H. Rees, Sabine Klug, and Sebastian Bamberg, "Guilty Conscience: Motivating pro-Environmental Behavior by Inducing Negative Moral Emotions," *Climatic Change*, October 14, 2014, 1–14.

¹⁶¹ See especially the work of Sarah Fredericks, for example Sarah E. Fredericks, "Online Confessions of Eco-Guilt," *Journal for the Study of Religion Nature and Culture* 8, no. 1 (2014): 64–84.

and unalloyed mirth. This was a feature of the woodchopper's personality that Thoreau emphasized.

He interested me because he was so quiet and solitary and so happy withal; a well of good humor and contentment which overflowed at his eyes. His mirth was without alloy. Sometimes I saw him at his work in the woods, felling trees, and he would greet me with a laugh of inexpressible satisfaction, and a salutation in Canadian French, though he spoke English as well. When I approached him he would suspend his work, and with half-suppressed mirth lie along the trunk of a pine which he had felled, and, peeling off the inner bark, roll it up into a ball and chew it while he laughed and talked. Such an exuberance of animal spirits had he that he sometimes tumbled down and rolled on the ground with laughter at any thing which made him think and tickled him. (VI, 10)

Here, Thoreau writes that his interest was inspired by the woodchopper's quiet, solitary happiness. Like the spring where Thoreau got drinking water in the summer when Walden Pond was too warm, the woodchopper was a "well" which "overflowed." The overflowing brought his happiness into Thoreau's life. The image of the woodchopper lying "along the trunk of a pine which he had felled" is, for me, one of the most haunting of *Walden*. Here, a man who spends his life in the woods chopping wood, has the freedom to "suspend his work" when Thoreau comes along. This was a marked contrast to the form of relentless, driven labor Thoreau described in economy. The woodchopper was so good at taking this leisure that he knew how to lie comfortably on a tree and enjoy it. Thoreau describes his laughter twice. When Thoreau comes upon him in the woods, the woodchopper offered in greeting "a laugh of inexpressible satisfaction." And then after the image of the woodchopper lying on the tree trunk, Thoreau says sometimes the woodchopper "tumbled down and rolled on the ground with laughter."

laughter

The portrait of the woodchopper shows Thoreau appreciating laughter, but did he ever write about laughing himself? It is hard to imagine someone so insistent on renunciation to have been able to laugh. But Thoreau does laugh in *Walden* and even play. The fourth chapter called "Sounds," follows the one called "Reading." In "Sounds" Thoreau suggests that, however much he praised reading in the previous chapter, it is only one part of living well.

But while we are confined to books, though the most select and classic, and read only particular written languages, which are themselves but dialects and provincial, we are in danger of forgetting the language which all things and events speak without metaphor, which alone is copious and standard. (IV, 1)

The chapter pivots from the first three chapters' focus on economic and educational practice to show what it's like to live in a place and be awake to it. Here, Thoreau practices listening, both to the railroad and to the creatures that live in the woods. "No method nor discipline can supersede the necessity of being forever on the alert" (IV, 1). This is the first time we see Thoreau considering contemplative practices, which is what most scholars of religion focus on when writing about Thoreau.

The title of the chapter is "Sounds," and it is certainly the case that part of what Thoreau means by being forever on the alert is cultivating attentiveness to sounds, but he suggests that "the language which all things and events speak" also includes seeing. Thoreau poses a question to the reader: "Will you be a reader, a student merely, or a seer?" That sight is mentioned here, in a chapter about sound, seems to indicate that it's not either the listening or the seeing that Thoreau means to recommend, but something broader: some attending, waiting. "No method nor discipline can supersede the necessity of being forever on the alert." This way of putting it,

however, makes it sound a little desperate to our ears, as though Thoreau is recommending a sort of anxious waiting. That is not it at all.

The 'being on alert' that Thoreau recommends is different from a frenetic expectation. Though Thoreau thought that labor was important, here he writes that sometimes the present moment was too precious to sacrifice it to work.

There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of the head or hands. I love a broad margin to my life. Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in revery, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveller's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been. They were not subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance. (IV, 2)

As the rest of *Walden*, the paragraph is full of words that allude to economic accounting: "afford," "margin," "subtracted," and "allowance" all suggest that Thoreau is playing with currently prevailing economic models. The allusions begin with one that is obvious, perhaps to call the reader's attention to the metaphor at play. Thoreau says "I could not afford to sacrifice..." But where the phrase would at first lead the reader to think he could not afford to sacrifice time for reading when he was busy hoeing beans (this is the topic at hand), he says, instead, that he cannot afford to sacrifice "the bloom of the present moment." (Recall the bloom

of fruits that is "the finest qualities of our nature" that requires tender treatment.¹⁶²) "Margin" refers both to the edges of the page of a book – and therefore to the time Thoreau spent on things besides writing – and also to the margin of profit over loss in a business. "Subtraction" is one of the arithmetic functions required for keeping accounts. And "allowance" often refers to the amount of money a person is given to spend in a particular period.

But the passage makes clear that Thoreau is not *actually* accounting, as some critics have suggested. Instead, he is making fun of the way in which many people think about time, and also articulating what he hopes will be a more attractive vision of life: sitting in the doorway, not noticing the lapse of time, or worrying that it is being spent badly. Because, as he says later, time is not for spending, time is precisely something other than spending. The wordplay of this passage represents one important form of Thoreau's humor. To write like this, I think, you have to find it sort of funny.

Thoreau also represents his good humor in passages in *Walden* where he is happy. One follows the previously quoted part of "Sounds."

For the most part, I minded not how the hours went. The day advanced as if to light some work of mine; it was morning, and lo, now it is evening, and nothing memorable is accomplished. Instead of singing like the birds, I silently smiled at my incessant good fortune. As the sparrow had its trill, sitting in the hickory before my door, so had I my chuckle or suppressed warble which he might hear out of my nest. (IV, 2)

Here, Thoreau likens himself to the birds, but he does so by comparing his "chuckle" to the sparrow's trill, implying both that Thoreau sometimes chuckles to himself while alone in his house, and that the sparrow's trill is an expression of good humor.

¹⁶² See Chapter Four.

Others in *Walden* also laugh, and the one who laughs the most is the loon. He appears, laughing, frequently. In "Solitude," when Thoreau is explaining why he is not lonely, he compares himself to the loon. "I am no more lonely than the loon in the pond that laughs so loud" (V, 15). And then in "Brute Neighbors," the loon makes its biggest appearance, in a long description that includes a game Thoreau plays, chasing him. In the fall the loon comes to the pond, "making the woods ring with his wild laughter before I had risen" (XII, 16).

Thoreau also laughs with Ellery Channing, whose visits he describes with warmth in the end of "Former Inhabitants; Winter Visitors."

The one who came from farthest to my lodge, through deepest snows and most dismal tempests, was a poet. A farmer, a hunter, a soldier, a reporter, even a philosopher, may be daunted; but nothing can deter a poet, for he is actuated by pure love. Who can predict his comings and goings? His business calls him out at all hours, even when doctors sleep. We made that small house ring with boisterous mirth and resound with the murmur of much sober talk, making amends then to Walden vale for the long silences. Broadway was still and deserted in comparison. At suitable intervals there were regular salutes of laughter, which might have been referred indifferently to the last-uttered or the forthcoming jest. We made many a "bran new" theory of life over a thin dish of gruel, which combined the advantages of conviviality with the clear-headedness which philosophy requires. (XIV, 20)

Here, Thoreau makes plain his preference for poets over even philosophers, and says that the difference between them is motivation: the poet "is actuated by pure love." Such a one is Ellery Channing, who came to Thoreau's house, even in winter, from farther than any other. And once he arrived, he and Thoreau "made that small house ring with boisterous mirth." This was their

contribution to the region's soundscape. Thoreau writes that the sounds made amends "to Walden vale for the long silences." He even says that their boisterousness made Broadway look "still and deserted in comparison." Their laughter was generous and abstract too: "At suitable intervals there were regular salutes of laughter, which might have been referred indifferently to the last-uttered or the forth-coming jest." The laughter between them was so generous that it sometimes referred to a joke not yet made. They laughed with the joy of being together, more than at any specific joke.

eschatology

The end of the chapter in which Channing comes and they laugh together features one of two important moments in which Thoreau projects an off-beat eschatology that demonstrates the sense in which his writing achieved the combination of earnestness and humor. The first moment describes how Thoreau was everywhere waiting for "the Visitor who never comes."

There too, as every where, I sometimes expected the Visitor who never comes. The Vishnu Purana says, "The house-holder is to remain at eventide in his court-yard as long as it takes to milk a cow, or longer if he pleases, to await the arrival of a guest." I often performed this duty of hospitality, waited long enough to milk a whole herd of cows, but did not see the man approaching from town. (XIV, 24)

The paragraph describes a practice oriented toward hospitality, standing outside, waiting to welcome a guest. This echoes with other practices Thoreau emphasized in his life that required the attentiveness he recommended. But it also offers a playful perspective on the passage it quotes when he writes that he "waited long enough to milk a whole herd of cows." The line plays with the way in which time is expressed in the text, and it calls up a funny image: Thoreau in front of his tiny house milking a whole herd of cows.

The second playfully eschatological moment appears in "House-Warming," when fall comes to Thoreau in his house, and he begins to warm it with a fire in the hearth he had built. This marks a transition in his relationship to the house: "I now first began to inhabit my house, I may say, when I began to use it for warmth as well as shelter" (XIII, 6). 'Inhabit' is a key term in *Walden*. 'Inhabitants' is the term Thoreau uses most often for the creatures who live or have lived in Walden Woods. Inhabiting a place seems to indicate for him the style of life that he endorses.¹⁶³ It also refers to the ancient sense in which virtue must be habitual. Inhabitation is a virtuous relationship with a place. Thoreau's dependence on the house for warmth is the marker of inhabitation of it, which suggests that there is no virtue without dependence.

Rather than being a limitation, for Thoreau the house's small size suggests that in it he has all the satisfactions that would, in a larger house, be distributed among its residents. "All the attractions of the house were concentrated in one room; it was kitchen, chamber, parlor, and keeping-room; and whatever satisfaction parent or child, master or servant, derive from living in a house, I enjoyed it all" (XIII, 6). A small house might seem to be lacking, compared to a house with many rooms. Where is Thoreau's parlor, if he only has one room? And where will he host his guests? Thoreau thinks instead that a one-room house concentrates the enjoyment it may offer. And Thoreau's role as parent and child and master and servant allows him, the inhabitant of this one-room house, to enjoy it more. He gets to have all of the experiences each of those others would have; his satisfactions are concentrated.

¹⁶³ On the matter of "inhabitants" see also the first paragraph of the posthumous 1862 essay "Walking." "I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil, – to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society." Thoreau, *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*, 260.

The one-room house also offers the occasion for Thoreau's eschatological play, when he describes a dream he has of another, different house, also of only one room, but bigger. The description of the spacious one-room house begins, appropriately, in one extensive sentence.

I sometimes dream of a larger and more populous house, standing in a golden age, of enduring materials, and without ginger-bread work, which shall still consist of only one room, a vast, rude, substantial, primitive hall, without ceiling or plastering, with bare rafters and purlins supporting a sort of lower heaven over one's head,—useful to keep off rain and snow; where the king and queen posts stand out to receive your homage, when you have done reverence to the prostrate Saturn of an older dynasty on stepping over the sill; a cavernous house, wherein you must reach up a torch upon a pole to see the roof; where some may live in the fire-place, some in the recess of a window, and some on settles, some at one end of the hall, some at another, and some aloft on rafters with the spiders, if they choose; a house which you have got into when you have opened the outside door, and the ceremony is over; where the weary traveller may wash, and eat, and converse, and sleep, without further journey; such a shelter as you would be glad to reach in a tempestuous night, containing all the essentials of a house, and nothing for house-keeping; where you can see all the treasures of the house at one view, and every thing hangs upon its peg that a man should use; at once kitchen, pantry, parlor, chamber, store-house, and garret; where you can see so necessary a thing as a barrel or a ladder, so convenient a thing as a cupboard, and hear the pot boil, and pay your respects to the fire that cooks your dinner and the oven that bakes your bread, and the necessary furniture and utensils are the chief ornaments; where the washing is not put out, nor the fire, nor the mistress, and perhaps you are sometimes requested to move from off the trap-door,

when the cook would descend into the cellar, and so learn whether the ground is solid or hollow beneath you without stamping. (XIII, 7)

The house of Thoreau's dream could not be more different from the one by Walden Pond. It is large and populous. This seems a strange contrast to the house that Thoreau built for himself, single occupancy, by the shores of the pond. He had the opportunity to share a larger and more populous house at Brook Farm, and he didn't take it, precisely because there would be too many people around. He joked about a boarding house in his journals.¹⁶⁴ But maybe this passage indicates that he hoped for a different future for himself, that he considered at least something about living alone not perfect in an eschatological sense, that the solitude was for something, perhaps for being redeemed into a more sociable world. Thoreau seems to say contradictory things on this point. One way to explain the house of the dream is to say that he changes over time, another that he is divided within himself. Still another, that he thought both were true somehow. I suppose each of these things is true in different cases.

But another way to think about this passage about the larger and more populous house is as a lovely, long-winded joke about the eschaton, the kind of joke you might play out with your friend, in the middle of winter, when he laughed before you even told the punch line.

conclusion

Thoreau was famously earnest. This was the man who wrote, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (I, 9). He was also, at the same time, deeply playful. The rest of the paragraph

¹⁶⁴ "As for these communities, I think I had rather keep bachelor's hall in hell than go to board in heaven. Dost think they virtue with be boarded with you? It will never live on the interest of your money, depend on it.

"The boarder has no home. In heaven I hope to bake my own bread and clean my own linen.— The tomb is the only boarding house in which a hundred are served at once—in the catacomb we may dwell together and prop one another without loss." Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Journal, Volume 1: 1837-1844*, 277–78.

in which that famous sentence appears suggests that it is precisely their lack of play that reveals their desperation.

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind.

There is no play in them, for this comes after work. But it is characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things. (I, 9)

Even the games and amusements they pursue are expressions of unconscious despair. What does it mean, "There is no play in them, for this comes after work"? Does it mean that there is no play in them, because in order to play you have to have worked, and they have not worked? Or does it mean that the games come after work, but play should be all day? Recall the woodchopper who, in the midst of his work was free to lay down on a tree and laugh. In any case, the logic of the passage seems to suggest that what wisdom requires is play without desperation. And the way to achieve this, in Thoreau's view, was to live a life of such simplicity that there was room in it for play. As a writer, Thoreau insisted that there are some things so serious you have to say them playfully.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ I am reminded of Myles Horton, who wrote:

I used to [be critical and disagree] whenever Martin Luther King, Jr., argued with me about nonviolence. He'd say, 'Myles, you don't go all the way with nonviolence, you've got reservations.' I'd say, 'Yes, I've got reservations.' For all practical purposes, I supported the nonviolence of the civil rights movement. It would have been counterproductive, in my opinion, to use violence; but philosophically, I reserved the right to say that at times I might be for violence in a revolutionary situation. He used to kid me and say, 'Well, we're going to get you to love everybody one of these days,' and I'd say, 'When they get worth loving, I'll love them.'

Horton and Kohl, *The Long Haul*, 195–96.

At the time of his son Waldo's death, Emerson wrote about Thoreau in a catalogue of the people who had cared for Waldo, on January 30, 1842:

Then Henry Thoreau had been one of the family for the last year, and charmed Waldo by the variety of toys,—whistles, boats, popguns,—and all kinds of instruments which he could make and mend; and possessed his love and respect by the gentle firmness with which he always treated him.¹⁶⁶

According to those who knew Thoreau, he also told jokes in person. One story tells that as he was dying, Thoreau's aunt asked him if he had made peace with God. Thoreau is supposed to have responded, "I did not know we had ever quarreled."¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, with Annotations*, vol. 6 (New York: Houghton Mifflin company, 1914), 152–53.

¹⁶⁷ Emerson, *Henry Thoreau: As Remembered by a Young Friend*, 118.

Conclusion

Thoreau's ideas

This dissertation is primarily an interpretation of *Walden*. Focusing on *Walden* as I have, however, ignores some of the most interesting scholarship on Thoreau of the past few decades. Sharon Cameron and William Howarth have both argued for the centrality of Thoreau's *Journal* in any assessment of his life and work as a whole. For both, the *Journal* (they usually capitalize and make it a singular, sometimes even italicizing it as a single title) is Thoreau's great work, both by external literary criteria and in his own view. This argument rests on the way in which the ongoingness of the *Journal* suits Thoreau's sense that thinking itself is ongoing, that it can never rest. In this, Thoreau's early work, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, was formative. A river provides an image of the way in which a thing can stay the same and keep moving, like a person who has different thoughts and experiences over time but remains the same in some important sense. For Thoreau, this did not come easily or simply.

Despite difficulty, Thoreau got from Goethe the heart to believe that he could write a great book. This would not have been obvious. Though it was something he wanted very badly, it took a long time to come to fruition in his life. Early in the process, it seems to have been Goethe who persuaded him that whatever his own strengths and (more pressingly) weaknesses, it would be possible for him to write a book. In the early years of his journal keeping, Thoreau wrote under subject headings. On December 8, 1837, while reading *The Italian Journey*, under the heading "Goethe," he wrote, "He is generally satisfied with giving an exact description of objects as they appear to him." Goethe's aim seemed to be "faithfully to describe what he sees, and that too, for the most part, in the order in which he saw it." This, Thoreau admired. I think he found it inspiring. In a new, one-sentence paragraph, Thoreau took heart in the idea that a book could be

built on the faithful description of what the writer saw. "It would thus be possible for inferior minds to produce invaluable books."¹⁶⁸ The strategy Goethe taught was to write what you see, to look closely enough that you can put into words the world around you. This strategy also had the virtue of leaving whatever ideas came out of the writing in their native habitat, and thus legible to readers without distortion.

A Week was published in 1849, the year Thoreau turned 32. He paid for its production himself, and he seems to have taken its poor critical reception as a sign that it was not the invaluable book he had set out to write. He felt that success was slow, and might never come. On July 19, 1851, he wrote, "Here I am 34 years old, and yet my life is almost wholly unexpanded. How much is in the germ! There is such an interval between my ideal and the actual in many instances that I may say I am unborn. There is the instinct for society—but no society. Life is not long enough for one success."¹⁶⁹

One struggle I have had in writing about Thoreau is that one of the key features of his work is how it represents his own attempt to come to understand, rather than to lay out an argument. This is related to the importance of the form of the journals. For him, writing was not primarily *for* expressing a position that would be immutable in time. Writing was for investigation, which in many cases meant a description of his own experience of unknowing. Thus, trying to write about his writing should not involve an attempt to say what he thought in some timeless sense, to express what his positions were. This is a problem with the reception by Furtak and others in philosophy who are trying to draw him into professional conversations in their fields. Rather, to write about Thoreau must always necessarily be a form of storytelling, that is, it must take place in time, and with attention to his own context, and to ours.

¹⁶⁸ Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Journal, Volume 1: 1837-1844*, 16.

¹⁶⁹ Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Journal, Volume 3: 1848-1851*, 313.

This entails a view about what ideas themselves are. I am not competent in the German philosophy necessary to explain how Thoreau came to think this way. I am not convinced Thoreau was either. But he and his friends were caught up in a spirit of the time, one that took from Germany philosophy, often through Goethe and the British Romantics, the sense that ideas were not abstract, decontextualized things without being, but were instead, as much else, living things who took shape in a community and coevolved with that community.

This dissertation has tried to tell a story about the world in which Thoreau's ideas took shape, and to say something about the shape that they took. This story runs against prevalent understandings of Thoreau as asocial, apolitical, and areligious. In the first part, I focused on Concord as the setting in which Thoreau's thinking was formed. The first chapter aimed to show the social world that *Walden* illuminated, the alternative community in the woods that Thoreau joined when he moved there among humans, trees, animals, and former inhabitants. The second chapter uncovered the political relevance of Thoreau's practices of renunciation by situating them in the developing industrial economy of the period. The second part pivoted to the religious and theological background to Thoreau's thinking. In the third chapter I argued that Thoreau's critique of philanthropy was theologically motivated, and in the fourth chapter I described the alternative religious response he suggested and experimented with: asceticism. The last part of the dissertation focuses on the implications of Thoreau's views for the ethics of writing. The fifth chapter suggests that the Romantic tradition holds within it an ongoing conversation about the difficulties of representing people justly in language. And the sixth chapter argues that Thoreau's severe earnestness and good humor surprisingly go together, because there are some very serious things you can only think to say out of joy. Delight in true goods is the most serious thing in the world.

In writing about him, then, I have tried to tell a story about him, the things he did, the world he lived in, and the things that world made him think. Of course there is also us, and the world we live in.

our world

Lynn White's classic article "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis" was published in 1967. This article has had an enormous impact on the way the academic study of religion and ecology as a whole has developed.¹⁷⁰ White argued that the Christian teaching of human transcendence of and mastery over nature was a major cause of unjustified human exploitation of the natural world, and thus that a new understanding of Christianity was required as a prerequisite to righting human-nature relationships.

White's view has shaped Christian reflection on the environment since, as many Christian theologians and ethicists have worked to offer the more wholesome understanding of human life integrated into nature that White called for. This has been important, productive work, in that it has offered the churches and all people of good will better, more integrated ways of talking and thinking and praying and living in the world. But I want to call your attention to a feature of White's view that has often gone unexamined and has been frequently repeated. Recall the shape of White's argument: there was a *problem*, an ecological crisis, "our Ecological Crisis" he called it, and it was *caused* by religious worldviews or cosmologies; thus, its *solution* would require new cosmologies.

Whatever our various opinions on the merits of this argument – and the profusion of theoretical questions about anthropocentrism and value that came after it – the thing I want to draw your attention to is its shape. The ecological crisis was rendered as a problem, a singular,

¹⁷⁰ A useful summary of this impact: Jenkins, "After Lynn White."

abstract problem. The article identified the problem's cause. From there, it seemed natural to seek a rather abstract solution, through a renovation of the Christian worldview.

Lynn White was not the first to take the view he did of the basic situation, and he has certainly not been the last. But even where Lynn White's particular rendering of the problem and its solution are not at issue – even where the environmental problem described is more specific than an "ecological crisis" writ large, and the solution is not thought to be a new worldview – this shape of thinking has been widespread in environmental ethics of the last 50 years and has taken many diverse forms. Call this the White paradigm, or perhaps more pejoratively "solution thinking." It has lately come under attack.

A slate of recent scholars have tried to find ways out of the White paradigm. Lisa Sedaris has argued insistently and controversially that new cosmologies focused on the mythopoetical possibilities of science – such as those advanced under the descriptions New Story, Universe Story, or Epic of Evolution – are at best unnecessary to and at worst self-defeating of their aim to motivate environmental commitment.¹⁷¹ Willis Jenkins described and sought to avoid what he called "the cosmological temptation" in *The Future of Ethics*. According to Jenkins, scholars who submit to this temptation usually, like White, "propose a new moral worldview within which to make sense of the problems of sustainability and social justice."¹⁷² This is a temptation to be avoided for Jenkins because "while often compelling, cosmological critiques pose a practical trade-off: they make our inherited moral world seem incapable of facing difficult problems." This is bad because, of course, our moral world is mostly inherited. We do not invent practicable new moralities out of thin air; we adapt them from our inheritances; we share them

¹⁷¹ A special issue of the *Journal for the Study of Religion* focuses the controversy around Lisa H. Sideris, "Science as Sacred Myth? Ecospirituality in the Anthropocene Age," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture* 9, no. 2 (June 2015): 136–53.

¹⁷² Jenkins, "After Lynn White," 4.

with others. Thus "cosmological critiques defeat the ethical task before it begins."¹⁷³ Sideris and Jenkins have different reasons for wanting to avoid the new cosmologies, but they agree that doing environmental ethics well will require a form that does not present any particular myth as a singular solution to our environmental woes.

Jenkins's alternative to the cosmological temptation was interesting. He aimed to eschew the common framework I have called the White paradigm, the one I characterized as seeking solutions to problems, but Jenkins did it precisely by beginning with concrete problems. The preface to his book explains why.

Students had pressed me to say what difference ecotheologies make for confronting particular problems, and colleagues in other disciplines wanted to know how I think theology matters to processes of cultural change. So I set out to describe how grammars of belief could generate satisfactory responses to representative problems of human power like: climate change, human poverty, biodiversity loss, and chemical exposures.¹⁷⁴

What he found in actually writing the book was that describing the problems themselves was a challenge in and of itself, and it did not in fact lead naturally to the "satisfactory responses" to those problems he had set out to offer. Ecotheology wasn't a solution; beginning with detailed descriptions of actual problems transformed the way he thought about the whole field, and the role he thought religious ethics could play in it. He wrote,

Ethics cannot start by responding to problems, but must participate in the interpretation and construction of problems, which requires attending to climate science, models of poverty, and the economics of discounting. Ethics cannot be a disciplinary operation performed by specialists after some problem is posed; it must be a capacity of practical

¹⁷³ Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 8.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, vii.

reasoning cultivated within interdisciplinary research struggling to interpret and frame emerging problems.¹⁷⁵

Jenkins began the project hoping for satisfactory responses to environmental problems, but engaging deeply with the problems themselves changed his views of what environmental problems *are* and how they are related to ethics.

And the picture wasn't pretty. As the first line of the book announced, "This book depicts how emerging problems of human power challenge ethical inquiry."¹⁷⁶ The title of the book, *The Future of Ethics*, did not refer to a prediction Jenkins proposed about what the future of ethics would look like; it instead described a profound question: is there any future for ethics? The kinds of problems environmental ethics describes are challenges not only in themselves, but also for ethical inquiry itself.

Thus, Jenkins undertook honest and accurate descriptions of environmental problems and found that in doing so he reframed the question – not 'how can we solve the environmental crisis?' But 'what will ethics in the face of unprecedented problems look like?' His answer pushed back against the White paradigm. "Religious ethics, I argue, should focus less on constructing and applying religious worldviews and more on inviting, tutoring, and pressuring moral communities to make better use of their inheritances."¹⁷⁷ Whether human communities can find ways of adapting and living through the inevitably difficult environmental future, religious ethics should participate in helping all moral communities adapt their diverse moral inheritances to our drastically changed situation.

Like Jenkins and the other scholars resisting new cosmologies as solutions to environmental failure, I think the prevalence of the White paradigm has been unfortunate, in that it has put an

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., vii.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

unnecessary constraint on our imaginations about what environmental ethics is, and has committed us to claims that seem straightforwardly false. As Jenkins has argued, it has been commonplace for religious ethicists to argue that "unprecedented challenges require religious and ethical thinkers to narrate a new story or retrieve a forgotten moral vision in order to reorient humanity's moral consciousness."¹⁷⁸ But who really hopes that we can reorient humanity's moral consciousness wholesale?

Stories are important, and moral vision helps us orient ourselves, but it cannot be the case that in order for my community in Florida to face the environmental issues I discussed at the beginning they need to *share* a moral vision. The fact of pluralism will persist in any community, even a largely homogenous one, as mine is. Sociologist Justin Farrell recently published an ethnography of Yellowstone in which he argues that environmental conflict persists in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, even with an abundance of scientific, economic, legal and technical evidence. This intransigent, often toxic conflict persists because it reflects "an underlying struggle over deeply held 'faith' commitments, feelings, and desires that define what people find sacred, good, and meaningful in life at a most basic level."¹⁷⁹ *That* struggle is not going to come to an end until history itself does, and seeking unity of moral vision under such conditions is not only futile, it refuses the diversity inherent in necessarily differentiated human personhood.

So, given that grand solutions are tempting but often silly, I am interested in how we in environmental ethics might accept the broader mandate that is implied by recent attempts to leave behind the White paradigm, and find other modes within our field besides solution-seeking.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 4.

¹⁷⁹ Justin Farrell, *The Battle for Yellowstone: Morality and the Sacred Roots of Environmental Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 3.

But still, I'm not wholly satisfied to be putting the point in exactly this way – as an attempt to avoid solution thinking in environmental ethics. My trepidation springs from two objections to this effort that I take quite seriously.

First, you might think, 'we need solutions to environmental problems!' We all know, I suppose, that there are in fact many diverse and difficult environmental problems. We know those problems often have the greatest negative affect on those with least power over them, which is unjust. And we rightly hope our communities will confront some of those problems productively, in ways that mitigate harm and suffering as well as we can. Further, as ethicists, we feel a justified responsibility to those communities as they struggle to right relations that have gone horribly wrong. And thus, you may be asking, do I actually want to discourage such efforts at problem-solving for communities in peril?

A second objection you may have to my desire to avoid "solution thinking" is that on one commonsense understanding of thinking itself, problems are in fact the basis for inquiry's advance. Call it pragmatism if you like, but you needn't. How do we know a question is worth asking? It is a problem for thinking. And how do we know our answer to it is good? It works, resolving the problem. If you do have this view of thinking, how, you might ask, can we do any inquiry at all without problems and solutions?

I take both of these issues seriously. I myself want the harms brought about by environmental problems to be mitigated, and the injustices that distribute those harms to the poor and powerless to be righted. And I do think that inquiry proceeds in many cases by uncovering problems and describing solutions to them. And yet, all the same, I still wonder if – in our perfectly

understandable rush to solve *environmental* problems – we may be blinding ourselves to some of our age's most interesting questions.

So let me take another step back, from the conversation in environmental ethics to a hasty sketch of a broader context in the wider field of ethics. I am clearly not the first person who studies ethics to think that the problem/solution shape of thinking is insufficient to our field. Objections to the role of thinly described moral quandaries in ethical inquiry has been a feature of the discipline from, say, the mid-twentieth-century dissenters in secular moral philosophy who pushed against an understanding of ethics as primarily concerned with rational principles for making difficult moral decisions. This movement made way for the resurgence of what we have often called virtue ethics: among both secular philosophers, who have usually taken ancient philosophy as a corrective to the problems they saw in twentieth-century moral philosophy, and Christian ethicists, who have usually taken Christian reflection on the virtues as a corrective.

To take one example from midcentury secular moral philosophy, think of Edmund Pincoffs 1971 article, "Quandary Ethics." It began like this: "There is a consensus concerning the subject-matter of ethics so general that it would be tedious to document it. It is that the business of ethics is with "problems", i.e. situations in which it is difficult to know what one should do."¹⁸⁰ Doing ethics with these sorts of problems, or quandaries, as the central subject implied that "the ultimate relevance of ethics is to the resolution of the problematic situations into which we fall."¹⁸¹ "Quandary Ethics," as he called it, usually treats these practical cases – in the typical example an "anonymous collision situation" – on analogy to legal practice; which is to say that "What is relevant [to the case] must have nothing to do with *me*, but only with the situation: a

¹⁸⁰ Edmund Pincoffs, "Quandary Ethics," *Mind*, New Series, 80, no. 320 (October 1971): 552.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 556.

situation in which anyone could find himself. What is right for me must be right for anyone."¹⁸²

In trying to offer ethical assistance to those of us who aim to live more ethical lives, Quandary Ethics insisted on describing the quandaries into which an agent might fall in general terms.

But this mode of ethical thinking had a serious pitfall, in Pincoffs's view. An agent's moral deliberation in his real life necessarily relies on features of his situation and views he holds of his own moral character that Quandary Ethics deems irrelevant to ethical problem solving. Quandary Ethics aims to discern what is right for anyone in the same circumstances to do. The problem is that agents do not carry out actions as general anyones in generic situations. "The question what is right for anyone in the same circumstances therefore provides the agent with but the beginnings of an answer to the question what he should do."¹⁸³ Whereas ethical inquiry aims to offer guidance to agents trying to live well, Quandary Ethics abstracted so much from agents and the ethical situations they face that it disallowed consideration of the very standards and ideals a moral agent uses to carry out moral deliberation. It is never the case that an act is carried out by an abstracted version of a human. "We are not then morally featureless." Pincoffs wrote,

We are not disembodied, historyless, featureless creatures. We are beings who have developed to a point, have even cultivated ourselves. The problems which we face must qualify as problems for us, be our problems: it makes a difference who we are. We cannot describe the problem by describing an anonymous collision situation. Aristotle did not give open lectures; St. Paul did not write open letters. When they used the word "we", they spoke from within a community of expectations and ideals: a community within which character was cultivated.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² Ibid., 558. The classic example is a trolley problem: there is a train on the track, you hold the switch that can save some and kill others, what do you do?!

¹⁸³ Ibid., 564.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 570.

Every individual agent has special features, features that are relevant to his moral deliberation. Indeed "It is precisely these special features which are likely to give form to the perplexities which arise. They arise for us, not in a void."¹⁸⁵ In this way, Pincoffs brought attention to the issue of character and context in ethical inquiry, and the title of his paper, "Quandary Ethics," became a slur within Christian ethics. No one wants to be a quandarist, and the work that this movement yielded on the importance of formation and character in ethical life has been tremendously fruitful.

In some cases, however, scholars have responded to the movement for virtue ethics by noticing a shortcoming of its emphasis on character: it does not always make clear how a person of good character, a virtuous person, actually addresses difficult, institutional, large-scale political and social problems. Scholars with this concern recommend a form of inquiry that is concerned not only with individual character and the virtues but also with the evaluation and transformation of the social forms and institutions in which those individuals take part.

So think of three important movements in the last fifty years or so: the suspicion of thinly described problems or quandaries, the resultant turn to character and thick description of problems rather than thin moral quandaries or abstract problems, and the important intuition that thick descriptions of good people do not actually do much on their own to address the most intransigent social and political problems we face. One of our most recurrent questions has been how to get from the small scale, where we focus on character and community, to the big scale, where we want to address systemic injustice. This scalar problem was never new, and it has only been intensified by the wicked problems of the anthropocene.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

In this context I hope that thinking again about Henry David Thoreau can address some of these issues. He was deeply invested in his own character formation, but he also thought that good character was an integral part of just social and political life. I hope my interpretation of Thoreau can, as Jenkins suggests, urge "moral communities to make better use of their inheritances" – without implying a solution to problems we know we will only work out through the muddle of contemporary social and political action. I do this by treating Thoreau as a political ascetic.

That phrase, political ascetic, is meant to strike you as surprising. Too often, the ascetic's renunciation has been characterized as first, wholly negative and self-denying, and second, retreating from politics. The last few decades – coincident with the turn to virtue ethics – have seen scholars correct the first point, about asceticism's being self-denying, especially by drawing attention to the positive self-formation such practices often pursue. This corrective has in some cases had its own distorting consequences, however. The focus it has placed on individual formation has sometimes obscured the constructive significance ascetic practices have had with respect to the wider social, political, and economic worlds of which individual practitioners were a part.

I hope that though my interpretive work about Thoreau is not focused on the practical environmental problems of the community I focus on in my ethnographic work, it nonetheless follows Jenkins's recommendation that religious ethics should focus less on constructing and applying religious worldviews and more on inviting, tutoring, and pressuring moral communities to make better use of their inheritances. Thoreau is an heir of ancient religious asceticism, and an important father figure for environmental thought and democracy in an industrial age. He is thus a major figure for diverse contemporary ethical communities.

Still, while I admire much about Thoreau's life and work, the point I am trying to make is not that we should take his form of ascetic politics as a straightforward example for our own action. Our world is radically different from his. The point is to say, against those who view the life reflected in *Walden*, and by extension a life invested in the practice of virtue, as a retreat from politics, that Thoreau's withdrawal from the standard economic practices of the period was not merely an effort to form his own virtue and avoid personal complicity. In his case, ascetic practice was also aimed at the transformation of the broader political world of which he was a part.

In this, my interpretation of Thoreau joins those who want to emphasize asceticism's positive role in the formation of individuals. It also suggests that scholars might find political aims at the heart of much ascetic practice, if we will give more in-depth attention to the social, cultural, and economic worlds that surround it. This, in turn, suggests that the tension I described earlier between those who want to emphasize an ethic of character and those who doubt that such an ethics can actually address the most pressing problems of our age, might look again at how this tension has played out in the lives of those who came before us.

And, I hope, it suggests ways of bringing important historical materials to bear on an environmental ethics that takes account of the three part movement I described earlier – a way that resists orienting itself by the desire to solve technical problems ethicists are not competent to address, that accounts for the centrality of character in the moral life, and that realizes the cultivation of virtue apart from politics (which is an oxymoron on my understanding) may not be sufficient to address the most intransigent moral problems we face.

What I am describing is not a straightforward model for our own politics. (Josh Kotin argues that almost all interpreters take *Walden* as a model, but he adamantly disagrees that it ought to be

read as one.¹⁸⁶) Neither is it nostalgia for a golden age of romanticism. Rather, I hope that the past's difference from the present is precisely what opens the possibility of a transformed future. Thoreau sought to envision a way out of the economies that were on offer – the developing industrial wage labor of the North, and the collapsing slave labor of the South. We still struggle to find a communal, economic life that can embody our highest ideals, and I do not pretend to have invented it here. But I hope that the fact that Thoreau is different from what we thought he was can show us that our future can be different from what we think it will be too.

Environmental ethics needn't be about how to solve a practical problem with abstract ideas. Living well is pushing as you can from where you are for the future of the world we share, it is loving some place and some people well enough – my mother taught me and my cousins to love sea grass beds and the communities that rely upon them – that you can mourn well the harms they undergo, work like hell to protect them, and in the meanwhile delight like a child in the goods of this, God's great wide world. Such delight – as ours when we fished – reminds us, even in impossible situations, when the way of life we love is passing away, that some things – the mourning, the work, the delight – are more important than survival.

the place I love

When I was a child, at home on a bay in the Gulf of Mexico, my mom and I would go fishing with my cousins for specimens to keep for a day or two in our salt-water aquarium. We have a short seine net – a rectangular net with brown square mesh – floats on the top and weights on the bottom. Each end has a pole attached. In shallow sea grass, wearing our bathing suits in the warm water of the bay, she would hold one pole and I the other. I would stand in the shallows, at the edge of the grass, while she ventured out into deeper water. As she walked, the water inched

¹⁸⁶ Josh Kotin, *Utopias of One* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

up her waist until she stood nearly neck deep. She turned, and she looked at me, and we would start to walk parallel to the shore, she a little ahead of me, so that fish scared by our steps and swimming out to the deep would be caught nonetheless in our net. The grass got caught in our toes. When the net was full, I would plant my pole and she would swing in toward the shore so we were both facing the beach, the net between us bulging with the baby animals that call this estuary bay home. We would pull the net up to the shore, lift it, and, surrounded by a little crowd of cousins, set it on the sand to see what we had caught.

The children, my cousins, would gather around after we had pulled in the net to see baby grouper, fat and black; little puffer fish, prickling like pineapples; sea grass-shaped needlefish, wriggling; mounds and mounds of shiners – the bait-fish that are silvery with yellowish stripes; and every now and then, for the luckiest searchers, a tiny seahorse, clinging to the grass that got pulled in. That was the most precious of all finds. For a brief moment when I saw a seahorse, hidden among the seaweed in the net, I swear it felt like the kingdom had indeed come. We would collect what we wanted for the aquarium in a bucket, and throw the rest back, to swim free in their ocean home. It was an exhilarating introduction to the variety of life that exists in this, God's great wide world.

The ecosystem my mother showed us when we fished was not only delightful to us as children. It is also the basis of the livelihoods for an entire fishing culture. 70 percent of the commercial species caught in the Gulf spend some juvenile period in the sea grass beds she showed us we should love. But that fishery has been struggling for decades through environmental change. Since the summer of 2010, when Deepwater Horizon exploded and fell into the sea, killing 11 workers and setting off the largest marine oil spill in the history of the petroleum industry, I have conducted intermittent fieldwork in a seafood town near where I grew

up, in a place just beyond where the oil from the Macondo well washed ashore. During the summer of 2014, as the local oyster industry faced collapse or transformation—we still don't quite know which—, I worked at a coffee shop, attended local government meetings, got to know seafood workers, marine biologists and environmentalists, and had individual conversations with as many of these people as I could about their thinking about the various environmental changes that face the region now, and are coming in the future.

One of these conversations presented what I have come to view as a major challenge to the kind of humanistic ethnographic research for ethics I went there to pursue. On August 11, 2014, in a discussion about how I might focus the topic of my research, a local environmental activist complained about a relational dynamic he thought was slowing down political efforts to resolve a water conflict. He said, "Part of the problem is because of this relationship dynamic going on amongst us [by which he meant the environmental organization he runs], the seafood workers, and the state. If you could put your finger on what that is we might be able to make some progress." In fact, the dynamic he described was what I was most interested in: finding out how people who share some aims, like "saving the bay" as they might say, but hardly any ways of thinking about the values that animate those aims end up talking to one another and making decisions on the issues they care most about. But his suggestion for my research, that I help them address problems they were having, showed his wanting my research to make things better in a concrete way, as the social scientists who so often study their community and what they call its 'resilience' usually promise they can.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁷ Some recent examples focused on the Gulf Coast generally, which is often seen as a laboratory of resilience because of the cyclical nature of hurricane destruction: Bret J. Blackmon et al., "Adapting to Life after Hurricane Katrina and the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill: An Examination of Psychological Resilience and Depression on the Mississippi Gulf Coast," *Social Work in Public Health* 32, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 65–76; Craig E. Colten and Alexandra Giancarlo, "Losing Resilience on the Gulf Coast: Hurricanes and Social Memory," *Environment*:

Despite my own investment in the place and the success of his efforts, I couldn't make such a promise. I had to say, "I don't think I have a solution to that problem." From my perspective, the relational dynamic he described was part of the ubiquitous difficulties of politics, difficulties that in this case weren't puzzles to be solved, via social science, but muddles they had to work through as well as they could. Muddles that *they* were the people most qualified to work through. He, however, took my saying I didn't have a solution to his problem as an expression of despair, as though if I didn't have a solution to a practical problem my research was futile. Having assumed this, our conversation continued with his commiserating and trying to encourage me. I didn't know how to tell him that it wasn't despair. I just figured I wasn't the most competent person in that situation to address the problem he was describing.

I tell you this story from that moment in my life – when I was wondering how I might use ethnography to think through some issues in environmental ethics – to explain one way I have experienced the search for solutions to environmental problems as constraining for my work. I am looking for productive ways around this constraint, because I maintain faith that religious ethics has much to contribute to a suffering world, even if we cannot solve its problems.

When one of my most important interlocutors for that ethnographic project took my sense of what my research was *about* as a sign of despair, I began to think there was some preliminary work I needed to do, before I could write the ethnography I had set out to write. Maybe I needed to learn to describe a form of thinking that can show people like him what I mean to do, why I

Science and Policy for Sustainable Development 53, no. 4 (June 24, 2011): 6–19; T. C. Hansel and Tonya Hansel, "Gulf Coast Resilience Coalition: An Evolved Collaborative Built on Shared Disaster Experiences, Response, and Future Preparedness," *Disaster Medicine & Public Health Preparedness* 9, no. 6 (December 1, 2015): 657–65, doi:10.1017/dmp.2015.118; John R. Logan, Sukriti Issar, and Zengwang Xu, "Trapped in Place? Segmented Resilience to Hurricanes in the Gulf Coast, 1970–2005," *Demography* 53, no. 5 (October 1, 2016): 1511–34; Paula A. Madrid, "Resilience Challenged: Thoughts on Children's Mental Health in the Gulf Coast 5 Years after Katrina," *Pediatrics* 128 Suppl 1 (August 1, 2011): S26–27.

am interested in their efforts and their communities without thinking I can offer them solutions, and how I hope to contribute to the flourishing of our shared life without directing my research at solving the most pressing problems they themselves see.

One thing I have tried to think about in writing this dissertation is what other kinds of moral inquiry might we conduct, both in the field and in the library, if we think that as ethicists – and more broadly, as humanists – we are neither obliged nor competent to address technical, environmental (or political) problems? More broadly, what else might there be for us to do if we take the view that environmental ethics need not be about solving the so-called environmental crisis?

The short version of my answer to this question is: lots! There are lots of things to do. We may not be competent to solve the environmental crisis – after all, who could be? – but environmental ethics can offer – is offering – the field of ethics more broadly an important case in which acknowledging the limits of the sort of inquiry we do can actually help us imagine a wider sense of our field as a whole, can give us a vision of ethics that does something different and deeper and more honest than worry over solutions to huge problems, problems that probably do not have solutions in the end.

Thoreau had his own worries about people with the instinct to solve. Philanthropy was, in his view, a field full of those who wanted to solve problems. Remember the one who ate green apples in Chapter Three and then set about reforming – the world? The solution-oriented reformers that Thoreau encountered troubled him. Change works more slowly than we would like in many cases, and the instinct to solve can make us impatient. But Thoreau's work shows that there are many things our work can continue to profitably do, even if we give up grand

solutions: we can redescribe problems, can see old problems as only the symptom of a deeper problem, can imagine new, more democratic solutions, and – perhaps most pressingly for a warming world – can see what we once thought were problems, like living within limits and the acts of renunciation such living requires, as blessings instead. Such renunciation can sometimes help us delight in true good.

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