Why (not) Ethics? Henry Thoreau's Experimental Privatism

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Abstract

Henry David Thoreau's reputation as a political thinker has been strengthened through an appeal to consider his moral and ethical thought as a means of challenging mass democratic political participation, invoking a critical view of liberalism that hearkens a new kind of citizenship. This advance in Thoreau's thought comes at the unfortunate expense of highlighting his somewhat vague ethics, however, and dismisses the larger portion of Thoreau's thought that not only dismisses ethics, but replaces it with an experimental individualism best expressed as privatism, the rejection of all forms of interpersonal activity that do not intensify individual life. This essay explores the consequences of reading Thoreau as an anti-ethical thinker, finding that Thoreau's most interesting and compelling contributions to political theory come via his rejection of the value of politics for life.

Introduction

> I am only an experimenter…I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no Past at my back.
>
> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles"

One of the most interesting and least studied aspects of 19th and 20th century American political thought is the lack of historical context that gives way to the free reign of experimentation, a value put to use in epistemological and metaphysical concerns by William James, John Dewey, and Alfred North Whitehead, and to existential and political use by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. In particular, it is the experimental character of Thoreau that serves to respond to many recent characterizations of his political thought,

particularly those characterizations that depict Thoreau as an ardent democratic teacher (Walker 2009; 2001; Taylor 1996; Cavell 1992), an ethical transcendentalist (Cafaro 2006; Bennett 1994; Richardson 1986), a moralist whose strict codes get in the way of normal politics (Jenco 2009, Tauber 2001), or, most recently, a conscience-driven individualist who attempts to change the way politics is viewed and practiced in America (Mariotti 2010; Kateb 2006; 1992; Turner 2005). This essay argues that interpreters who hasten to place Thoreau in the liberal camp, or deny his political potential by appealing to a strict moralist interpretation, ignore the bedrock value of experimental vitalism, a uniquely American contribution to political thought that places the highest value on an action's ability to appeal to the enhancement of an individual's life without suffocating that individual's ability to choose other lives in the future.

For many reasons, Thoreau embodies the experimental vitalist tradition more than any other American thinker. First and foremost, Thoreau's experience in "finding a vocation" is a life-long experiment that takes him to several different professions, including teaching, writing, lecturing, surveying, pencil-making, and so forth (Richardson 1986). Secondly, Thoreau's most strictly political tracts—speeches such as "Resistance to Civil Government," "Slavery in Massachusetts," and "A Plea for Captain John Brown"—all contain rejoinders that demonstrate Thoreau's inability to commit himself to a cause that does not bring him pleasure:

> At any rate, I do not think it quite sane for one to spend his whole life in talking or writing about [slavery], unless he is continually inspired, and I have not done so. A man may have other affairs to attend to (Thoreau 1971: 133).

This quotation, from "A Plea," echoes the sentiment Thoreau expresses in other so-called "reform" writings. Crucial to this statement is Thoreau's unwillingness to qualify one's "other affairs" ethically or politically; in fact, the other affairs Thoreau attends to may be, as Emerson notes, "leading a

huckleberry party" or something equally insignificant. Thoreau does not qualify these issues ethically because his primary concern is not with the ethical value of life, but life's ability to justify itself. For this reason, his experimental vitalism largely rejects the seductions of political and ethical life.

This essay will concentrate on the insistence in critical literature on Thoreau of emphasizing an ethical component of his thought. Through the ethical component, Thoreau scholars are able to ground the belief in a liberal or post-liberal political consciousness that renders Thoreau's privatism a mere "mistake." I concentrate primarily on Philip Caputo and Jane Bennett, two Thoreau scholars who demonstrate the most nuanced view of his ethics. I move from the critical literature on Thoreau to John Caputo's work which calls into question the value of ethics to life, and conclude with a reading of Thoreau's famous speech "Life without Principle."

Thoreau's Ethical Life

Whatever disagreements appear within the various camps of Thoreau's interpreters, it is difficult to find contemporary Thoreau scholars who do not distinguish an ethical element within Thoreau's philosophy. In his exhaustive intellectual biography of Thoreau, Robert Richardson argues that Thoreau was an "ethical transcendentalist," by which he means someone who subscribes to the categorical imperative of Kant (Richardson 1986, 73). Similarly, Jane Bennett, whose book on Thoreau remains one of the better attempts to fuse Thoreau's thought with contemporary debates in political philosophy, isolates Thoreau's reverence for the "ethical power of ideals" and maintains that Thoreau was, throughout his life, an ethically-charged thinker (Bennett 1994, 74-76). Most recently, Philip Cafaro's book *Thoreau's Living Ethics: Walden and the Pursuit of Virtue* attempts to find within Thoreau's work space for a standpoint of virtue ethics. Bennett's and Cafaro's work highlight commonly-held assumptions that Thoreau's political philosophy is motivated by ethics of some sort or another, and that the ultimate goal of Thoreauvian philosophy is social change through

individual change. Bennett accomplishes this by straining Thoreau through a series of postmodern challenges to subjectivity and politics, while Cafaro extends to Thoreau the historical olive branch of virtue ethics in order to clear up some of his more privatist leanings.

To what degree is it possible to call Thoreau an "ethical thinker?" I argue that Thoreau was involved in creating and sustaining a philosophy of conduct based not on collective ethics but individuated virtue, and that the consistent return to the self in *Walden* highlights Thoreau's resistance to universalizing ways of life. In fact, Thoreau says it best when he writes:

> I would not have anyone adopt *my* mode of living on any account; for, beside that before he has fairly learned it I may have found another for myself, I desire that there be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way (Thoreau 1971, 71).

This spirit of distance from the existential decisions of another demonstrates Thoreau's unease with collective notions of correct action and his displeasure with the notion of gaining followers. Instead of practicing ethics, which would require generalized standards of the good, Thoreau retreats from prescriptions and focuses on the process of individuation clarified through the practice of virtue. Thoreau widens the divide between ethics and virtue and his philosophy exposes the problems in generalizing the good while promoting the ability of selves to construct and maintain projects that sustain and appreciate their own lives.

Thoreau's imperative of "minding one's own business" highlights an important strand of American thought, a strand that constructs American identity out of the unwillingness to universalize ways of life for individuals. This radical freedom—which is really a freedom from concern—is a process of simplification, in line with Thoreau's primary vehicle for his comprehensive privatism. In this regard, Thoreau stands alongside many in the American tradition, but most specifically Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., and William James.

Both thinkers align with Thoreau on the imperative of taking one's perceptual lens and turning it back upon oneself instead of forging general rules of conduct from one's particular view of the good. This view is stridently anti-ethical and it stands as the core of American contributions to political and social constructions of society. Thoreau's particular contributions to the establishment of virtue at the expense of ethics, simplification and privately-experienced sensation, locate the individual self at the starting point of life—not system—and use this vital engagement of individual appreciation to suspend the judgments of others. On this reading, there is no room for ethics.

Two recent works most strongly construct the argument that Thoreau's politics involves ethical elements. Jane Bennett's *Thoreau's Nature: Ethics, Politics, and the Wild* locates a "postmodern sensibility" in Thoreau's works that contains kernels of the ethical possibilities of postmodern society, but argues that Thoreau fails to account sufficiently for their emancipatory potential. Philip Cafaro's *Thoreau's Living Ethics:* Walden *and the Pursuit of Virtue* takes a different route, concentrating on the possibility that Thoreau's *Walden* demonstrates virtue ethics in a way similar to Emerson's. Bennett's focus is on relating Thoreau to contemporary continental philosophy on matters of ethics, nature, and politics; in so doing, she seems to discount Thoreau's own project of self-cultivation and turns instead to the major shortcomings of Thoreau's alleged ethics.

Cafaro, on the other hand, finds in Thoreau a kindred spirit for Emerson, the American thinker who most completely espouses the theory of virtue ethics through his concentration on living well and translating that life to others. Cafaro grafts Emersonian individuality on to Thoreau's philosophy, turning *Walden* from a work largely dealing with individual virtues without regard for social import to a book dealing with the cultivation of virtue for the betterment of self and society. Cafaro blurs the line between ethics and virtue, using them interchangeably as the vehicles by which one achieves and measures personal excellence. This fusion of terms disrupts and reduces the distance Thoreau

wishes to keep between the cultivation of the individual and the care for the whole.

Jane Bennett's reading of Thoreau's politics establishes two primary theses concerning Thoreau's legacy: 1) Thoreau was a forerunner of postmodern thought in his disruption of the concept of the unitary self and the displacement of nature, and 2) Thoreau's ethics remains the most troubling portion of his philosophy. On the first thesis, Bennett wants "to suggest now…some of the general ways in which Thoreau exhibits what one might call a *postmodern sensibility* and thus crosses into the late twentieth century" (Bennett 1994, xx). For Bennett, Thoreau's political philosophy is grounded in the dislocation of identity into constructed and malleable formations that sometimes become part of our biological and cultural makeup. It appears that Thoreau's primary interest in identity is deconstructive, and that his deconstruction of identity brings forward the contestation with nature, in which Thoreau appears as the sojourner and the world becomes the "Wild," the unsettled, uncategorized projects (Bennett 1994, xxi). Bennett's Thoreau operates in multiplicity, complicates the projects of normal life, and tries to modify politics, identity, and ethics through the example of nature (Bennett 1994, 76fn20).

Thoreau distances himself from the late twentieth-century postmoderns by finding space for ethical thought, particularly the Christian ethics that dot some of his more familiar writings. Bennett states that "the voice of Christian ethics can be heard clearly in his reform papers, especially 'Life without Principle,' the John Brown defenses, and 'Slavery in Massachusetts'" (Bennett 1994, 29). Thoreau's writings are infected with historically-situated ethical wanderings, and it is these wanderings that separate Thoreau from someone like Nietzsche, who is critical of the sense of self as well as the religious institutions that imported such an ethic to Thoreau's mind in the first place. Bennett's critique of Thoreau centers on his inability to detach from his upbringing and socio-cultural climate as well as his overall destruction of the political landscape

that leaves little hope for substantive change or the means by which one can change politics at the macro- or micro-level (Bennett 1994, 88). Thoreau's ethics situates political change as a proximate goal but cannot muster the strength to enforce or even promote this change (Bennett 1994, 86). By positing Thoreau as an ethical thinker, Bennett sets the boundaries for his successes as a philosopher, finding his thought wanting in terms of ethical content, couched between a disdain for politics and the residue of a Christian ethic inherited through the American conscience. To Bennett, Thoreau becomes important for his forerunning of postmodernism, but loses his edge through the refusal to grant politics the ability to transform lives, even in these postmodern times.

Bennett's ethical configuration of Thoreau rests on a belief that his writings offer a charge of moral clarity and that the social terrain we navigate is full of opportunities for exposing the everydayness and offering individuals the possibility of rising above the mundane. For Bennett to make such an argument is strange, considering her emphasis on Thoreau's disruption of modern themes and his refusal to accept politics as a vehicle for social change. What comes out of Bennett's reading of Thoreau is essentially a tragic figure, one who is stuck between temporal spheres in his reception of himself, nature, society, and politics. Thoreau's emphasis on self is thoroughly modern, while his challenge to static selfhood establishes a frame for postmodern reception. Bennett's Thoreau is, above all, a strikingly American thinker who cannot escape the contradictory boundaries of his own thought. Bennett's conception of the "Wild," which she establishes as Thoreau's postmodern frame, is the basis for an ethical reception that demands less certainty and more contingency, less stability and more flux, but cannot redeem the means by which this process would take place. This view coalesces with most critical reception of Thoreau, which evaluates his view of wildness as affirmative:

> Thoreau's views on wildness and the reflecting orders of American nature and the wild American self are in several ways

> closer to Hawthorne than Melville. Melville's international views are involved with the moral intricacies of all sorts of difficult personalities as well as with the equivalent complexities of an external nature that no one can understand. Thoreau's parochialism is aggressively positive and has far more to do with places and animals than with a recognition of the dark strata in the human order (Garber 1977, 71).

The consequence of Bennett's tragic rendering of Thoreau is that in Thoreau's struggle for identity, his sense of virtue is transfigured into an "ethic of Wildness" (Bennett 1994, 93). But Thoreau's personality and disposition cannot uphold an ethical platform, which leads to a tragic understanding of his philosophy. This relation between the cultivation of individual virtue and the establishment of ethics is the issue Philip Cafaro will inherit in his book, *Thoreau's Living Ethics*.

Cafaro enters the discussion of Thoreau's ethics from the position of virtue ethics, which is inherited from Aristotle and holds human excellence as the primary motivating force behind being and mobilizes selves toward cultivation that enhances both the self and the whole (Cafaro 2006, ix). Cafaro aims to demonstrate that Thoreau's ethics operate similarly to the virtue ethics paradigm, which is to hold that Thoreau emulates Emerson's emphasis on human flourishing and the establishment of grounds for collective flourishing as well. As a result, Cafaro tends to distance himself from the term "ethics," choosing instead to make great use of "virtue" both as a complement to ethics and as a stand-in for it. Cafaro's argument rests on making ethics as little universal as possible, instead holding Thoreau's emphasis on the individual to be a signal that his ethics is primarily concerned with the self, although, as an ethics must be, it is to a large degree capable of generalization (Cafaro 2006, 118). Cafaro's attempt to update Thoreau's ethics must conflate an authentic concentration on virtue with the mission of ethics, which is to "refuse to accept the way things are and fight to change them" (Cafaro 2006, 177).

Cafaro plays with the notions of virtue and ethics, claiming correctly that both involve, at the base, value judgments about existence and worth (Cafaro 2006, 29). The notion of self-culture, which is important to virtue ethics, blurs the lines between cultivation of the self and the society, arguing that the blanket concept of human flourishing can cover both the self and the other without compromising either (Cafaro 2006, 21). Cafaro is quick to pick up on Thoreau's notion of "business," finding that it extrapolates the concept of virtue for Thoreau's thought. Cafaro cites Thoreau's great quote: "Let every one mind his own business, and endeavor to be what he was made" (Cafaro 2006, 50). Virtue separates itself from ethics through marginalizing participation in the other by maximizing the virtue of simplicity. Cafaro calls simplicity a "keystone" virtue:

> Simplicity, to borrow a concept from ecology, is a "keystone" virtue. It plays an important role in stabilizing and focusing our lives, and allows the development of a rich character manifesting diverse virtues (Cafaro 2006, 61).

Simplicity disrupts the social imperative of virtue ethics by restricting individuals to those activities and engagements which focus and stabilize life. Cafaro holds simplicity as a virtue that can handle the fusion of individual virtues with public ethics, but Thoreau's own vision of simplicity does not give that virtue so much leverage. Perhaps Walden's best example of simplicity consists of Thoreau's description of his "shelter," wherein he describes the rationale behind housing and the various possibilities for individuals who seek ways to cover themselves from the elements:

> If it is asserted that civilization is a real advance in the condition of man—and I think that it is, though only the wise improve their advantages,--it must be shown that it has produced better dwellings without making them more costly; and the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run (Thoreau 1971, 31).

Thoreau's *Walden* is, perhaps, the best American example of valuating the capitalist fever from the standpoint of personal vitality and individual choice.

Thoreau's concentration on shelter as a vital mechanism challenges the sociality of housing and the superfluous "necessities" of collective lives esteemed through capitalist values. As a counter to the complexity of self-punishment and self-evaluation through public means, Thoreau provides simplicity as his guiding virtue. Simplicity, which extends beyond shelter toward work, politics, art, and nature, supplants the desire to please the other or live for the other with the equally-charged desire to affirm those experiences and details of existence that support the individual's own life. Simplicity involves detachment from the public, and a return to the self. In this sense, it performs the acts of virtue (as finite perfection) while avoiding the difficulties of generalized ethics (which would, of course, be more sociality and less individuality).

Cafaro's attempt to graft virtue ethics onto Thoreau fails because Cafaro insufficiently accounts for the degree to which Thoreau is *not* Emerson; that is, Cafaro brackets his argument for Thoreau around an Emersonian sense of individuality, which does involve a mutual appreciation between self and other (Cafaro 2006, 110). Thoreau's individuality, on the other hand, is much more radical: instead of focusing on the cultivated society as an end goal, Thoreau dispels utopian figuring, focusing on the cultivation of self regardless of the type of political or social climate in which one happens to live. While Emerson may be motivated by a desire to give back, Thoreau's virtue lies in plundering the various institutions of his time for any benefit he may glean, without accepting a subsequent duty to uphold and applaud the contemporary socio-political order that makes his life easier.

Cafaro's difficulty in appropriating Thoreau's ethics stems from the fact that Thoreau's philosophy contains no ethics, not even the stripped-down version of virtue ethics that rings similar to that proposed by Emerson. Thoreau's philosophy of privatism involves a turn away from ethics because the value of simplicity cannot sustain it. Cafaro unwittingly uncovers a significant difference between Emerson and Thoreau that is covered in both Richardson's *Henry*

Thoreau and Harding's *The Days of Henry Thoreau*: Emerson and Thoreau disagreed vehemently on the social importance of transcendentalism, to the point that Emerson found it difficult to stomach Thoreau's more fervent individualism. One could argue that the most pointed difference between Emerson and Thoreau is the absence of ethics in Thoreau's thought.

Bennett and Cafaro are two examples of many Thoreau interpreters who attempt to locate space for a "politics of hope" packaged as a sort of ethical imperative within Thoreau's philosophy. These attempts rise out of popular disapproval with Thoreau's largely detached private life and philosophy. His thought, however, remains resistant to such a characterization. In order to defend Thoreau popularly, it is assumed that his thought must be demonstrated as ethical (or possibly ethical) or it will be dismissed as weakness. Perhaps Cafaro puts it best: "If Thoreau feels confident in his decision to live a largely private life, an ethical justification of this decision eludes him" (Cafaro 2006, 185). Cafaro echoes the discomfort of other interpreters by noting that Thoreau is unable to "justify ethically" the type of life he chooses to live. Thoreau, however, never attempted to justify his life ethically, as he repeatedly makes clear in the opening pages of Walden:

> What distant and different beings in the various mansions of the universe are contemplating the same one at the same moment! Nature and human life are as various as our several constitutions. Who shall say what prospect life offers to another (Thoreau 1971, 10)?

Thoreau does not desire universalization of his life-project, nor does he desire this from anyone else. The ethical treatment of Thoreau attempts in some sense to "save" his philosophy—in Rosenblum's terms, to "chasten" his thought. The consequence is an ill-fitting ethical cloak placed on Thoreau's privatism, a covering that requires taking tremendous steps with his thought or turning his withering ethics into the space for critique. Ethics requires a sense of the good that can be transferred from one life to another—a leap Thoreau is not willing to

make. The thought of Thoreau's philosophy abandoning ethics leads us to a question: is ethical thinking a de facto property of the political philosopher? And, if not, on what grounds can one be "against ethics?" In order to answer these questions, John Caputo's book *Against Ethics* can provide us with some compelling clues.

No Ethics? Caputo's Return to Obligation

Perhaps the most robust statement against ethics in contemporary philosophy is provided by John Caputo, whose book Against Ethics argues that the contemporary world picture renders a concept like "ethics" groundless, but that the absence of clout for "ethics" does not signify a necessary dreariness:

> To be surrounded by disaster, to be the victim of a disaster, is to look around at a destruction for which there is no recompense. That is why disasters are an abyss, an *a-logos*, an *a-nomos*. Disasters are events that "ethics"—which turns on *logos/ratio/nomos*—cannot contain, that ethics cannot bring under the rule of its principium or *arche*, under any of its favorite master names, that ethics cannot master. Disasters constitute a loss for which there is no *ratio reddenda*, a loss which is without why, groundless (Caputo 1993, 29).

Caputo holds ethics accountable for finding ground for itself amidst the horrors of the twentieth century and finds that the "disaster" itself cancels ethics through the refusal of any type of retribution for loss. Caputo calls disaster an "utter wasting," and it is the foremost thrust in his critique of ethics. How can we generalize action and attempt to universalize the good amidst the possibilities and realities of disasters? There are many experiences and events that defy the "good," and transform existence in ways that cannot be accounted for or repaired. Caputo's claim to be against ethics lies in the belief that existence itself is not conducive to the "good," particularly not in the pluriverse of postmodern society. Disasters do not produce "results" and cannot lead to positive consequences. They are irredeemable, although the language of ethics forces us to try to redeem them nonetheless (Caputo 1993, 30).

As a response to the damaging consequences of ethical thinking, Caputo presents the concept of obligation, which differs from ethics in several important ways. Obligation comes upon us and takes hold of us, denying us any "will" in "choosing" our obligations:

> I do not regard the bond that binds obligation to the disaster to be a matter of a "value" we should "hold," or of a "claim" we "make." Obligation is rather—this is what a poetics of obligations brings out and where it starts—a matter of being claimed, in which something has a hold on us, something that is older than us, that has us before we have it…It is not an effect produced by a subject, not the work of a subject, but rather something produced in me, as in a patient, something that happens to me (Caputo 1993, 31-32).

The turn to obligation is not a subjectivist one, as Caputo denies the individual any plausible say in the obligations that haunt him. We are, in Caputo's words, "laid hold of by others" and it is not our choices but our positions in existence that mandate the types of obligations and situations we will find ourselves trying to navigate. Without ethics, the world we inhabit still contains hope, but those hopes and ideas for individuals "only go so far" (Caputo 1993, 32). Caputo's invitation is that once we accept the groundlessness of ethics and look into the phenomenology of obligation, we find that it is indifference that we must fight to the greatest degree we can.

The question for Caputo becomes: to what degree can we count ourselves responsible for the lives of others in a non-ethical sense? Caputo quickly turns to Nietzsche's philosophy of affirmation, which requires saying "yes" to the manifestations of existence as they are lived. This affirmation of life includes an affirmation of suffering:

> To affirm is to disburden, unleash, to set willing free in unencumbered affirmation, in the creation of new values, which are themselves the issue and invention of the willing itself. To affirm is to loosen and disentangle willing from whatever would tie willing up, whatever would be put in a bind (Caputo 1993, 45).

This characterization of Nietzsche's philosophy as against both ethics and obligation bears important consequences for Thoreau's thought as well. Nietzsche's unconditional affirmation denies responsibility altogether, and responds to the internalization of responsibility in the form of guilt that plagues individual lives. Thoreau carries a similar distaste for this internalization, which takes many forms:

> How godlike, how immortal is he? See how he cowers and sneaks, how vaguely all the day he fears, not being immortal nor divine, but the slave and prisoner of his own opinion of himself, a fame won by his own deeds. Public opinion is a weak tyrant compared with our own private opinion. What a man thinks of himself, that is which determines, or rather indicates, his fate (Thoreau 1971, 7).

The individual's inability to affirm his own life and instead find himself under the scrutiny of consistent obligation results in the externalization of joy (through recognition) and the internalization of hatred (manifested in guilt). Nietzsche's recognition of individuality at the stage of *ressentiment* forces us to examine the benefits of ethical thinking as well as the philosophy of obligation Caputo supplies as its replacement. To argue that affirmation falls short of philosophical or social goals because of its refusal to fight indifference and injustice creates an ethical language in which to disguise the ingenuity of obligation. Nietzschean affirmation and Thoreauvian simplicity challenge the desire to internalize guilt and responsibility by challenging the very notions of responsibility and obligation in the first place.

Caputo's case against ethics is very much a noble effort to replace ethics with something more manageable—more "timely"—to our political-social assemblages. Rallying against Nietzschean affirmation while himself affirming the forgetting of ethics is a tightrope that leaves Caputo weakly promoting responsibility without the means of strengthening such a posture:

> The point of serving as obligation's poet is to make this sort of unresponsive irresponsibility look as bad as possible and to

> make responsibility look as good as we possibly can (Caputo 1993, 68).

Caputo's case for obligation is the case against indifference, which we will approach in a later chapter. Caputo's decision to replace ethics with obligations maintains the optimism of the modern period without succumbing to the theological arguments that uphold ethics as a philosophy of life. As far as Caputo is concerned, to be against ethics is not necessarily to reevaluate the types of human beings we are, but to amend our language, to justify our hope by changing its name. Ethics, in this case, appears as a tired discursive tool finding itself ill-equipped to signify the postmodern context. The turn against ethics is thereby nothing more than a discursive flight-of-fancy, a way of feeling better about the contexts we use without changing the core of the concepts we come to hold as vital lies or useful fictions. Perhaps Caputo is right to hold "thinking the impossible" among the most important tasks of "philosophy," but thinking the impossible accepts ethical thinking more than it challenges it (Caputo 1993, 82).

Thoreau's philosophy challenges the traditional acceptance of ethics through a dissection of ethical arguments and the subsequent development of virtue as a privatist response to the void left by the disappearance of ethics and ethical thinking. The virtues, for Thoreau, are thoroughly individual; in this sense, they correspond to the divorce of virtue from ethics developed in Weinstein's *Finite Perfection: Reflections on Virtue*: "The struggle to tame the beast ends, for me, with virtue, strictly individualized virtue that organizes artistry and love around self-control" (Weinstein 1985, 2). For Thoreau, similarly, the call to ethics falls on deaf ears because it endears the individual to the type of organizational society that prompts such strong distaste and estrangement in the first place. Thoreau finds the mass society discomfiting precisely because its premises are universalized into an ethical program. In short, the mass society and its ethical calculations disregard life, which occurs in the flux of experience and is felt through the individual consciousness. Pre-reflective formulations on

the value of life forget the body and its coincidence with the soul, which is a requirement for sanity in Thoreau's view (Porte 2004, 9). Ethics, as a standard of action for individuals that divorces principle from circumstance, forges its ground on the identification and ideological establishment of a general sense of good. This sense of good, augmented by a belief in progress of the self and society (as in Emerson) or a post-ethical postulation of "thinking the impossible" (as in Caputo), cancels individual experience and instead preempts self-evaluation of life. The turn to virtue grounded in individual life responds to the externalization of the self's assessment of itself and its environment.

Thoreau's Virtues: a (non)ethical Experiment in Living

Thoreau's rejection of ethics in favor of vitalism provides the ground for his positive project of self-identity and provides interesting corollaries to the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, who also disavows ethical formulations of action. Nietzsche's Daybreak, which establishes a positive comprehensive philosophy subsequent to a rejection of custom, provides insight into the anti-ethical stance Thoreau will himself develop:

> Sometimes to act *against* one's better judgment when it comes to questions of *custom*; to give away in practices while keeping one's reservations to oneself; to do as everyone does and thus to show them consideration as it were in compensation for our deviant opinions:—many tolerably free-minded people regard this, not merely as unobjectionable, but as 'honest,' 'humane,' 'tolerant,' 'not being pedantic,' and whatever else those pretty words may be with which the intellectual conscience is lulled to sleep: and thus this person takes his child for Christian baptism though he is an atheist; and that person serves in the army as all the world does, however much he may execrate hatred between nations; and a shirt marries his wife in a church because her relatives are pious and is not ashamed to repeat vows before a priest. 'It doesn't *really matter* if people like us also do what everyone does and always has done'—this is the thoughtless prejudice! The *thoughtless* error! For nothing *matters more* than that an already mighty, anciently established and irrationally recognized custom should be once more confirmed by a person recognized as rational: it thereby acquires in the eyes of all who come to hear of it the sanction of

> rationality itself! All respect to your opinions! But *little deviant acts* are worth more (Nietzsche 1997, 97)!

Nietzsche's polemic against custom takes the conversation down to the level of the individual and strikes a chord with the self who, by all accounts, accedes to custom while fighting it on the inside. A shrewd psychologist, Nietzsche is all-too-aware of the consequences of this internalization of deviance with the external façade of compliance. The individual, who quietly opposes morality but supports it in public exhibition, defies himself and provides the arbiters of morality with space through which to defend themselves against him. Public acceptance of private objection is, in Nietzsche's terms, an act of weakness.

Thoreau's defiance toward ethics and custom carries similar force to Nietzsche's. Ethical action, that which defines the good citizen, is hopelessly caught up in tradition and custom, thus providing no vital force for individuals:

> The gregariousness of men is their most contemptible and discouraging aspect. See how they follow each other like sheep, not knowing why. Day and Martin's blacking was preferred by the latest generation, and also is by this. They have not so good a reason for preferring this or that religion as in the case even. Apparently in ancient times several parties were nearly equally matched. They appointed a committee and made a compromise, agreeing to vote or believe so and so, and they still helplessly abide by that. Men are the inveterate foes of all improvement. Generally speaking, they think more of their hen-houses than of any desirable heaven. If you aspire to anything better than politics, expect no cooperation from men. They will not further anything good. You must prevail of your own force, as a plant springs and grows by its own vitality (Thoreau 1906, 10:351).

Thoreau and Nietzsche fortify their respective individualisms through a critique of custom, which registers a strike against ethical universalization and habitual action. Thoreau's distaste for custom references a refusal to think critically on the matter of the good, which is necessary for a just and liberal society. Thoreau's emphasis on historical knowledge and its unappreciative application to

contemporary times brackets the question of ethics, or customary action based on the "good," below the level of individual consciousness and, thus, below the level of conceptual understanding. The problem with ethics, for Thoreau, is that it does not respond to life and that it does not take life into account in its dominion over individuals.

Perhaps the most interesting statement Thoreau gives on virtue is the extraordinary "Life Without Principle," an essay published in 1863, originally given as a lecture titled "Getting a Living" in late 1854. Ostensibly concerned with the ways individuals earn income and the relation of employment to self-worth, the essay unpacks Thoreau's somewhat confusing statement on virtue by bringing questions of the good down to the vital level of individual desire and preparation. Thoreau's essay stands as his definitive statement on the role of politics and economics in everyday life, and Thoreau's response is characteristically practical and private: the individual means of earning income have something important to say about the application of virtue in our daily lives and the consequences of bridging this individual gap through collective means. The remainder of this essay will focus on a reading of "Life Without Principle," which gives us the best entrance to Thoreauvian virtue against ethics.

The essay begins with a self-conscious Thoreau, reducing expectations for the lecture and the essay by arguing that although individuals do not wish to hear (or read) him for his "meat," instead preferring the "shell," that his purpose in lecturing (and writing) is to give individuals a "strong dose of himself," though this may not accede to the desires of his audience (Thoreau 1973, 155). The purpose of this essay is, as Thoreau notes in introductory remarks, to "consider the ways in which we spend our lives" (Thoreau 1973, 156). Immediately, Thoreau enters into a large-scale critique of the world of "business," which alters individual desire through the promise of a "better" life and the esteem of one's neighbors. For Thoreau, the most important aspect of the American business ethic is its reduction of questions of value to instrumental

values—that is, it takes an ethical stance on all things by providing a model of human productivity that serves not the individual, but the corporation, utility, or state:

> If a man walk in the woods for love of them half of each day, he is in danger of being regarded as a loafer; but if he spends his whole day as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making earth bald before her time, he is esteemed as an industrious and enterprising citizen. As if a town had no interest in its forests but to cut them down (Thoreau 1973, 158)!

Thoreau returns throughout his writings to the concept of respectability, and the various ways in which individuals can become respectable by reducing their desires to the instrumental desires of others. For Thoreau, the discouraging aspect of business is not its economic import but its correlative social ascendancy over individual means of appropriating value. In the above passage, Thoreau self-consciously examines the public reception he might receive while on his walk, and juxtaposes that with the reception he might receive as a speculator (or, in his own case, a land surveyor). Work provides a means of identification, an interpretation of self grafted onto that self through its acquiescence to collective ideals of work and contribution. Thoreau's effort, in the essay, is to scrape a sense of identity out of the ethics of work—a move that finds him searching for a new table of values with which to take to work.

Thoreau's initial response to the world of work is to side-step it through an act of indifferent supremacy:

> The community has no bribe that will tempt a wise man. You may raise money enough to tunnel a mountain, but you cannot raise money enough to hire a man who is minding *his own* business (Thoreau 1973, 159).

Here we see Thoreau's valuative criteria of simplicity make its entrance through denial of the efficacy of economic, social, or political institutions on the desire and projects of an individuated personality. The most important thing to remember here is that Thoreau uses the word "community" as the source of

alienation, frustration, and devaluation; he does not, as we might assume, use the local term "business" or even "money." Thoreau here is expanding his critique beyond the political economy of the soul toward a critique of the ways in which ethical behavior (now defined vitally by Thoreau as that which is rewarded by the mass of men) cement individual lives in a series of uncompromising valuative principles that steal life from individuals. Here, "Life Without Principle" moves beyond a mere critique of work toward a larger deconstruction of social life—as such, it is his most penetrating and compelling critique of the ontology of groups. Thoreau maintains a manageable distance from society—"I feel that my connection with an obligation to society are still very slight and transient" (Thoreau 1973, 160)—which gives him the opportunity to make a living while maintaining a space between his own valuations of life and the collective valuations of the American work ethic and the oncoming consumer society of middle-class America.

The prime example of the life without virtue—the life of instrumental valuations of work and enjoyment—is characterized, in Thoreau's time, by the California gold rush of the mid-19th century. As a means of getting a living, the gold rush does not enhance individual life—in fact, irrespective of whether one finds gold or not, the results of the rush are an undeniable reduction in vitality. This exposes the vacuity of the American work ethic—which is, as much as a means of getting by, an *ethical* principle that aims to produce a certain kind of life. The result is a reduction in the value of nature and individual life:

> If I could command the wealth of all the worlds by lifting my finger, I would not pay *such* a price for it. Even Mahomet knew that God did not make this world in jest. It makes God to be a moneyed gentleman who scatters a handful of pennies in order to see mankind scramble for them. The world's raffle! A subsistence in the domains of Nature a thing to be raffled for! What a comment, what a satire on our institutions!...Did God direct us so to get our living, digging where we never planted,—and He would, perchance, reward us with lumps of gold (Thoreau 1973, 163)?

Thoreau can hardly contain his astonishment at the *willingness* of human beings to reduce themselves from the identity they create for themselves to the compensatory identification with the promise of riches. Individuals sacrifice something important to themselves—both corporeal and incorporeal—through the investment in "getting rich." But this wealth, which cannot provide an equivalence of happiness or satisfaction, ensnares the individual in its valuations of life—in effect guaranteeing an economic interpretation of self-worth that cannot coalesce with the individual's own wider experience. Thoreau inserts theological concerns into the economic equation in a measure that comments on the bond between work and God in American culture, in effect compelling conscience back toward its paradoxical origins.

Thoreau's short excursion into collective valuations of life leads to a declaration of withdrawal—not out of moral outrage but personal virtue—that is characteristic of Thoreau's privatist positioning. Thoreau's critique of the ethical implications of consumer society and the corresponding casting of individuality under this representation of value gives him the opportunity to stage a new valuation of life based on individual conscience:

> At any rate, I might pursue some path, however solitary and narrow and crooked, in which I could walk with love and reverence. Wherever a man separates from the multitude, and goes his own way in this mood, there indeed is a fork in the road, though ordinary travelers may see only a gap in the paling. His solitary path across-lots will turn out the *higher way* of the two (Thoreau 1973, 164).

Thoreau's insistence on characterizing individuation as a "higher" achievement in fact cements virtuous individual life as a life which is *rooted* in itself and thus reaches beyond normal experience. Thoreau's repeated usage of theological language is not careless; when he walks with "love and reverence," however, it is not toward God but toward himself in the process of becoming the arbiter of his desires and esteem. Thoreau's critique of our daily interactions with each other—

from economics to politics to communication—reveal the primary desire to allow oneself to choose one's own modes of happiness, and that the loss of the private aspects of human life results in a loss of perceptual focus:

> Just so hollow and ineffectual, for the most part, is our ordinary conversation. Surface meets surface. When our life ceases to be inward and private, conversation degenerates into mere gossip…in proportion as our inward life fails, we go more constantly and desperately to the post office (Thoreau 1973, 169).

Thoreau understands that in a complex collective of codified mores, human communication is forced and not vital, and in most cases restricts individuals from articulating their wishes or attitudes. The above quotation marks the second point in the essay that Thoreau equates social interaction with a surface or shell, leaving the meat or authentic portions of human experience alone. In the interaction between two individuals, there is no space for virtue *or* privacy, but only a callous gossip that shadows the lack of vital vigor between the two. This is a thorough critique of complex social interactions ruled by norms, manners, and ethical imperatives—we find ourselves amidst the restrictions on intimacy, attempting to forge meaningful relationships through the offices of culturally-mediated communication.

The culture of communication in Thoreau's time revolves around a fetish for the "news of the day," a passive orientation to knowledge acquisition that, for Thoreau, portends more than just the fashions of the day—it exposes the rotten core of human relations:

> Not without a slight shudder at the danger, I often perceive how near I had come to admitting into my mind the details of some trivial affair—the news of the street; and I am astonished to observe how willing men are to lumber their minds with such rubbish—to permit idle rumors and incidents of the most insignificant kind to intrude on ground which should be sacred to thought…it is important to preserve the mind's chastity in this respect. Think of admitting the details of a single case of the criminal court into our thoughts, to stalk profanely through their very *sanctum sanctorum*

> for an hour, ay, for many hours! to make a very bar-room of the mind's inmost apartment (Thoreau 1973, 171-172).

Again, in this passage, Thoreau employs the theological language that preserves his argument within the notion of taking the protective stance toward the heavens and turning this stance inward, making the self a god to the self. Everyday conversation reveals that individuals feel comfort in discussing issues that are foreign to them—the affairs of other individuals, trivial news, fashions—and they do so with antiquated manners that hinder intrusions into the fragile psyche. For Thoreau, ethics as it is employed in everyday life therefore performs two essential functions: 1) assurance of easy speech between individuals, and 2) an alienation from self necessary for the completion of social tasks and mores in efficient manners. Conversation and news—the two primary interpersonal means of distributing knowledge—are then a sort of spoliation of the individual's integrity, and Thoreau builds a critique of ethical action based on the essential disaffection of these interpersonal functions.

Thoreau's response to the means of communication and knowledge-sharing between individuals is to restrict and protect the self's intake of news and gossip. Thoreau's vigilance toward maintaining his own integrity on his own terms is a microcosm for his project of reclaiming virtue at the expense of ethical standards of action. By removing himself from collective offices of communication, Thoreau importantly rejects collective valuations of his time and his energy. "Life without Principle" becomes the essay that explains why and how Thoreau will remove himself from the ethical constellation and replace that with something personal—private virtues practiced with vital intent:

> By all kinds of traps and sign-boards, threatening the extreme penalty of the divine law, exclude such trespassers from the only ground which can be sacred to you. It is so hard to forget what is worse than useless to remember! If I am to be a thoroughfare, I prefer that it be of the mountain-brooks, the Parnassian streams, and not the town sewers. There is inspiration, that gossip which comes to the ear of the attentive mind from the

> courts of heaven. There is the profane and stale revelation of the bar-room and the police court. The same ear is fitted to receive both communications. Only the character of the hearer determines to which it shall be open, and to which closed (Thoreau 1973, 172-173).

Thoreau's "Life without Principle" is no doubt an exemplary text in Thoreau's works that displays such a powerful declaration of distance between the individual and the society. Thoreau's conclusion, toward the end of the essay, is that one must keep on guard against the infractions on individuality proposed by collective offices of communication. Individuals are suited to hear either their own call to virtue or the externalization of the mind, and it is only individual choice that determines the ultimate benefactor of individual attention. Thoreauvian virtue relies on presenting individuals with choice dependent upon a deconstruction of tradition. In this sense, calling Thoreau an "ethical thinker" misses the mark entirely. Thoreau's concerns with individual virtue are not transferable wholesale, and he has no wishes to make them so. Even "Life without Principe," perhaps Thoreau's most complex essay, does not emerge with anything other than an invitation for the other to entertain the pursuit of virtue by abandoning the living ethics of collective life.

Conclusion

Thoreau's status as an ethical thinker has hardly been questioned. Contemporary appropriations of Thoreau's thought tend to focus on the ways in which his critique of democratic institutions rises out of moral outrage, and that his subsequent prescriptions are meant as ethical imperatives for individuals and societies. There is little within Thoreau's work, however, that supports this thesis. Perhaps the earlier critics of Thoreau's thought, like Hannah Arendt and Heinz Eulau, were closer to the truth when they refused to grant Thoreau status as an important ethical thinker. The contemporary reconstruction of Thoreau's thought has given us the possibility that it possible futures in a hopeful manner, and that his goal is the transformation of American society along ethical lines.

This reconstruction, however, comes at the cost of manufacturing a good many arguments about Thoreau's thought that find little or no textual verification. Simply put, Thoreau's "moral" philosophy is concerned with personal virtue, and this virtue does not coalesce with ethical imperatives but in fact *supplants* ethics altogether.

Bennett and Cafaro, in their respective works on Thoreau, attempt to make his thought more manageable for contemporary interpreters by approaching it as prime material for various ideological goals of political philosophy. Bennett's insistence that Thoreau displays an "ethic of wildness" does not take sufficiently seriously Thoreau's statements, in "Life without Principle" and elsewhere that deny the efficacy of ethical maxims to individual life. Cafaro, on the other hand, attempts to bridge the gap between virtue and ethics by concentrating on Aristotle's understanding of virtue and importing it for Thoreau. While this strategy may in fact succeed in interpreting Emerson, it does not succeed in interpreting Thoreau. Cafaro spends little time distinguishing between Emerson and Throeau and supplies little to no evidence concerning how Thoreau's virtue is consonant with ethics in any fashion.

But perhaps to be against ethics is to risk being inconsequential as a theorist, or at least to be seen as a smug or pessimistic philosopher with no vision for the future. Caputo's work *Against Ethics* challenges that understanding, arguing (much along the lines of Thoreau) that there is nothing to support ethical considerations when we place them in the light of life as it is lived. Caputo's rally against ethics, however, falls short when he decides to replace the term with one of his own, "obligation," that also happens to serve the primary function of helping us to "think the impossible." Caputo's replacement of ethics is supposed to alert us to the ways in which we do not choose our situations—and that the contemporary "disaster" makes any ethics unthinkable—but Caputo does not give us a picture of how obligations differ substantively from ethics. If anything, Caputo's obligation is merely ethics *in the world* rather than as postulate. This

rally against ethics is useful for bringing us to Thoreau, who will reduce ethical questions to the vital interests they serve.

Thoreau alerts us to the hazards of collective life by demonstrating that individual ethical choices are grounded in the type of life they support. The fruits of ethical living in the United States are characterized by the gold-rush, the packaged news, and the various ways in which individuals communicate with each other under the umbrella of manners. Thoreau highlights the notion that seeking after money is not just a way of life in America but in fact an *ethical* choice by examining the respectability of the industrious worker and the solitary walker; while each employs nature to his or her services, it is the worker who wins the accolades of society by contributing to the wellness of society. This is not just a political economy, but an *ethical economy*, something that is dear to Thoreau and of the utmost importance for understanding his thought. His critique of the economics of 19th century America is foremost a critique of its ethical foundations and the ways in which these foundations are transferred onto individuals who seek the American dream. Thoreau's critique of ethics is a thorough critique of the way we "spend our lives," the motivating factors of our existence and the consequences of these actions. It is for this reason Thoreau turns to experimental vitalism, the cultivation of finite perfections that lead the individual out of the collective sources of meaning and toward an individuated existence augmented by a philosophy of privatism.

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