

Socratic Dialogue: Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*

Essential Question

Are we obligated to always obey the law? If yes, why? If no, what criteria can be used to determine when disobedience is morally justified?

Opening

1. What word, phrase or line do we need to understand to get to the heart of Thoreau's work?
2. What does Thoreau want us to believe?
3. Do you like Thoreau's viewpoint? Why or why not?

Core

1. Which did Thoreau think was most important--that government should increase the material equality between citizens, or that government should preserve the liberty of citizens? Relating this to other texts we have read, which do you think the 1776 generation (Thomas Paine, Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson) would say was most important?

2. Thoreau begins with a quote from Thomas Jefferson "That government is best which governs least." In what other ways is Thoreau's thinking similar to the thinking of those who signed the Declaration of Independence? Can you see any ways in which his thinking differs from theirs?

3. Who should ultimately have the final say: the individual, the citizens as a whole, or the government? Do we (as citizens) have responsibilities to society? What are they? What are the limits that government should follow in intruding in our daily lives?

Can the government restrict your beliefs? Are there beliefs or actions that the government should try to alter? Should we be forced to pay taxes for other people's needs?

4. In *Walden*, Thoreau said, "The government of the country I live in was not framed in after-dinner conversations over the wine."

In *Civil Disobedience*, he says "I please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor; which even would not think it inconsistent with its own repose if a few were to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, nor embraced by it, who fulfilled all the duties of neighbors and fellow men."

Does he mean the same thing by "the country" in the first quote as he means by "a State" in the second quote? Explain differences between the meaning of a country, a nation, and a state.

5. In discussing the role of the individual, which quote best outlines your philosophy?

“If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go. . . perchance it will wear smooth - certainly the machine will wear out. If it 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.” Thoreau

“An individual must do what his city or country demands of him or he must change their view of what is just.” Socrates

“Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country.” Kennedy

What problems or limitations do you see with the various views?

What should be the relationship between the individual and the government?

What is the best reason (or what are the best reasons) for obeying the law? Are there some circumstances that outweigh these reasons? Is there ever a valid reason for breaking a law? What should the consequences be for someone who breaks the law because of moral convictions?

Can you see yourself breaking a law in order to obey a higher principle? Explain

6. Can we ever reach the government that Thoreau advocates?

Are we a democracy in Thoreau’s eyes? In your eyes? In the textbook definition of democracy?

What areas of our government today would Thoreau attack? Defend

Are there leaders today that Thoreau would admire? Detest?

Closing

1. What are some situations today where people are working for changes in the name of justice (liberty) or social justice (equality)? To what extent should they go to accomplish their goal? What advice might Thoreau give them?

2. If Thoreau were alive today how would he judge America?