

Thoreau's idea of progress in technology



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If Thoreau were to retreat to Walden Pond today, would he bring along the internet? This question, suggested by a recent Christian Science Monitor headline, gets to the heart of important aspect of Thoreau's project. Readers of Walden would be more inclined to suggest that he wouldn't, simply because his whole book preaches simplicity and the significance of solitude and detachment from society - which is the exact opposite of what the internet, especially in the age of smartphones, encourages. This essay aims to explore Thoreau's opinionative views on progress in technology and will also attempt to juxtapose the relevance of his statements and arguments with that of our contemporary era.

In the first chapter entitled, Economy, Thoreau confidently discredits the railroad and the magnetic telegraph - two highly celebrated technological achievements of the time, by referring to these as "modern improvements" with "an illusion about them." He declares that "they are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which it was already but too easy to arrive at; as railroads lead to Boston or New York. We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate." This blatant expression of discontent towards modern devices can be distinguished throughout Walden. Even with regards to the mail system, Thoreau declares, "For my part, I could easily do without the post-office. I think that there are very few important communications made through it." An accurate summary of Thoreau's standpoint whereby the historical context is taken into consideration would be as stated by Yoshiaki Furui in his essay, Networked Solitude: Walden, or Life in Modern Communications:

Walden can thus be read as a narrative of withdrawal not only from society, but also from the so-called “communications revolution” underway during Thoreau's residence at Walden Pond between 1845 and 1847. With the development of the postal network, the invention of the telegraph, improved distribution routes through the expansion of transportation, such as railroads and canals, and the rise of the penny press, antebellum America underwent a significant transformation in terms of communications media and the technologies that enabled them. Each of these developments served, as a popular phrase of the era put it, “to annihilate time and space” (329).

While Thoreau's arguments may either be commended or scornfully rejected by critics, he would never know and probably would never have guessed that these “modern improvements” would in the future play great roles during two great world wars - amongst other major defining incidents in history - and in time become more common means of transportation and communication to a rapidly growing population all across the globe. He may insist on simplicity and the needlessness of these technological advancements, but it is evident that Thoreau was living an idealistic existence. He repeatedly wrote about change, and the “miracle” of which, as well as his conviction that obviously supports change: “old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new.” However, Thoreau clearly draws a line for this notion of change, as he plainly refuses to welcome the change in technological developments. He challenges readers to consider how this new technology affects our habits, our weaknesses and strengths. An example of which is when Thoreau ironically states in regards to the telegraph, “as if the main object were to talk fast and not to talk sensibly.”

Moreover, Thoreau appears to overlook his advice to readers that “ it is never too late to give up our prejudices.” He seems to have failed to notice his own prejudice against these advancements, and one can only imagine the sort of reaction he would give to the “ modern improvements” of the 21st century. He would most likely insist that we do not require even the internet, let alone computers and mobile phones. He would most probably argue against the modern devices of present day the same way he described the railroad and magnetic telegraph: “ Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things.” On the other hand, there is a possibility for the opposite. Thoreau may instead welcome the internet, laptops and smartphones, but he would more than surely utilize them only for the benefit of his genius. As a lover of books, Thoreau was a man who read in abundance, especially during his solitary stay at Walden Pond. In today's version of a retreat to the woods, people would bring their laptops and mobile phones, and along with the internet it is equivalent to being in the wilderness with electronic books and an infinite sea of information and knowledge in our hands and laps. However, it is undeniable that whether these devices are used for work or entertainment, they are indeed “ pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things,” and in Thoreau's point of view, nature, in particular, was one of the “ serious things” that was necessary to be focused on during his time at Walden Pond.

In my opinion, Thoreau's perspective on these “ modern improvements” are not relevant to today's context. We owe a great deal to the advancements of trains and the telegraph; the first now providing better comfort and ease to journey across nations within lesser time, such as the development of the

bullet train in Japan, and the Fuxing train in China (now the world's fastest train as of June 2017), and the latter having progressed into far more sophisticated and accessible modes of communication, such as the telephone and now the mobile phone. These advancements would not have been achieved if we had not started somewhere, and now they are necessary assets in the 21st century, especially in connecting all parts of the world together. With regards to the financial matter of the time, Thoreau argues that one would have to spend an entire day working in order to earn enough money for the train fare, and in that one day he would have instead been able to reach his destination on foot, thus arriving sooner and on far lesser cost than taking the train. However, this no longer applies to today's circumstances as a train ride through the city would not cost a whole day's wage (in context with the middle-class majority).

Although Thoreau's opinionated statements point to antipathy towards these modern improvements, it is evidenced that he did not outright condemn them. To him, the railroad was, "comparatively good, that is, you might have done worse; but I wish ... that you could have spent your time better than digging in this dirt." Thoreau would have preferred it if the multitude of men constructing railroads had spent more time on their intellect and well-being. However, he did not completely disregard the effectiveness of the railroad as it is "comparatively good" for its use. Gray Matthews wrote in his essay based on Walden and Thoreau's journal, entitled, Introduction: Upon Hearing an Aeolian Harp:

One day in 1851, Henry David Thoreau entered a deep cut in the woods carved out for railroad tracks and heard a telegraph wire vibrating like an

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Aeolian harp...He explained that he had been listening to the wind “ which was conveying a message to me from heaven” when it began to speak through the vibrating wire as it passed... (7).

Matthews then compares Thoreau's description of the sound to that of listening to an Aeolian harp as he is reminded of how to “ contemplate in a world of technology”. His depiction of Thoreau's point of view towards technology is as follows:

Thoreau transcended the purposes of both the railroad and the telegraph in order to pay closer attention to what was infinitely higher. He did not complain or criticize the intrusion of mechanical forces at this time because he had already been paying rapt attention to the wind to begin with before he listened to it touch and pass over the most modern form of communication technology of his day (7).

This highlights the idea that Thoreau did not completely repel modern devices, but pushed aside his dissatisfaction and was able to accept them. From Thoreau's words, Matthews ponders on the role of technology today, and whether we might be able to transcend the “ purposes” of the internet and smartphones the way Thoreau had “ transcended the purposes of both the railroad and the telegraph in order to pay closer attention to what was infinitely higher.” According to Matthews, the internet and all its glory not only “ distract[s] our attention from serious things,” but also deceives us. We are drawn and caught within the intricate, unbreakable strands of the world wide web, and the images we see, the information we read, are not always the definite truth; or sometimes they are the truth, but they are moulded

and defined to deliver only specific, chosen messages to the general public. We are deluded into thinking that the present world, and all that we are able to access - the infinite knowledge - is equivalent to paradise. We fail to look beyond because we are content with the heaven in our screens. All the knowledge within our modern devices is everything that has already been discovered, and what is yet to be discovered requires us to look beyond the rectangular screens before us. To quote Matthews from his essay:

How large must our monitors be to take in the sky? How can we Google paradise? What is the difference between a human face and its image? How do we practice detachment in a wireless environment? How do we see when we are deceived? (9).

While dissatisfied with man's obsession towards "modern improvements" and yet still able to accept its role in society, Thoreau's *Walden* points out his overall standpoint on the subject of progress in technology: "There is not always a positive advance," Thoreau states. Even though society and the world continued to advance with these technological modernizations, Thoreau's words continue to carry some truth to this day. We must be able to look beyond these "advancements" to see what is "infinitely higher," dedicating more or just as much time and energy and passion into improving ourselves as with technology.