

An issue of charity in walden by henry david thoreau

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Philanthropy in Thoreau's Walden

When you first start reading Henry David Thoreau's book, *Walden*, there are so many things that demand to be analyzed. The multiple topics that exist within the book are numerous, yet there are several that stick out amongst the rest. One of these is Thoreau's views on the practice of philanthropy. Some people do not appreciate philanthropy very much, which Thoreau acknowledges by stating that people tend to see, "often the poor man is not so cold and hungry as he is dirty and ragged and gross. It is partly his taste, and not merely his misfortune," (80, Thoreau). It is this attitude that Thoreau challenges in *Walden* for multiple reasons. In general it was the philanthropic gift he received shortly before embarking for Walden Pond from his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson that helped him shape his views on philanthropy. This act of philanthropy influenced his opinions of those who embrace philanthropy, what he believed were the best forms of philanthropy and why it is such an important part of society. All in all, when examining Thoreau's writings in *Walden* at Walden Pond, focusing on the idea of philanthropy, it becomes clear that the actions of his friend would influence Thoreau and be present in his writing and reflections for years to come.

Before Henry David Thoreau went to live at Walden Pond, he had certain opinions on Philanthropy that would become more clear and developed during his experience at the Pond. However, all of these decisions were no doubt influenced by a philanthropic act that he experienced right before moving to Walden Pond, for without this act there would have been no *Walden* at all. Thoreau had always been very good friends with Ralph Waldo

Emerson, their relationship falling somewhere between best friends and that of a father and son (Smith). The fathering role was held by Emerson who, “felt a strong sense of responsibility toward him,” (95, Smith). This bond grew in strength shortly after Thoreau lost his brother and Emerson opened his home to his grieving friend (Smith). During this time of mourning, Emerson realized that his friend felt lost and was in need of some sort of retreat away from the world and to a simpler place (Salt). Some where he could think, read, and write; hopefully regaining some of his old personality back as well. When he heard that his friend Thoreau wanted to, “go away soon and live by the pond,” (62, Salt), he knew what he had to do to save his friend from the sad depressive state he had fallen into since the death of his brother and his nearly complete encasement in a crowded, urban environment (Salt). Shortly after that instance, and without being asked or asking for anything in return, “Emerson himself... had bought land on both sides of Walden Pond,” (64, Salt). This could be considered one of the most perfect Philanthropic acts, as Emerson is giving a person he cares about a gift that will bring him a great deal of joy despite any personal sacrifice. Emerson’s action helped Thoreau form an idea of philanthropy, though it was not his first experience with charity. Because this occurred right before he went to go live at Walden Pond and he was experiencing the benefits of his gift while staying there, he judged those who performed charitable actions favorably. He was especially favorable toward those who had gotten to know an individual and learn what they needed rather than simply making a monetary contribution to some philanthropic organization. However, Emerson did not stop there.

After making the purchase of the land surrounding Walden Pond, Emerson had originally intended to build a summer house for himself and his family on the property. However after discussing the situation with a friend, Emerson went to Thoreau with an idea (Smith). He discussed Thoreau's current temperament and said he believed he had found the solution that would give him the fresh outlook on life he desired. Emerson came up with a proposition that, " Henry build a one-room house on his land in which to write a book," (100, Smith). This proposal was welcomed by Thoreau, as it allowed him to get away from the crowded city he had come to hate and would be in a place he had come to love, Walden Pond (Salt). Also, it meant that while he resided there and in his reflection looking back years later in his book *Walden*, he saw a great deal of his experience through a lens that reminded him that a philanthropic act was responsible for the reason he was able to have these experiences. It was not just the fact that this experience was possible, but the fact that it had been given to Thoreau as a gift, that he had not had to ask for and was not expected to repay that influenced his writing. Not only the two years he lived by the pond, but for the rest of his life he would remember the warmth he felt in the glow of the philanthropic gesture of a friend. The experiment was without a doubt a successful one, as Walden Pond became for Thoreau, " what Brook Farm was to others of the Transcendentalists-a retreat suitable for philosophic meditation and the practice of meditation, and the practice of a simpler, harder, and healthier life," (65, Salt). It healed the parts of his soul that had been broken for so long in the wake of his brother's death. This belief is also evident in his reflections in *Walden* when he states, " I had several more lives to live," (351, Thoreau)

which implies he felt rejuvenated and was able to look at life and the world around him with fresh eyes. With the knowledge as to why he was able to have this experience fresh in his mind, it is obvious why Thoreau was focused on the idea of philanthropy while writing *Walden*.

In general, most people think of being charitable or philanthropic, they imagine writing a big check to charity; however throughout the book it becomes evident that Thoreau did not share this point of view after his real life experiences. Early in his book *Walden*, Thoreau expresses the belief that, “ philanthropy is almost the only virtue which is sufficiently appreciated by mankind,” (81, Thoreau). Thoreau had some definite opinions as to what truly counts as philanthropy towards mankind, and did not seem to think along those lines. When he sees a poor Irish laborer fall into a frozen pond near his house, he invited him in to warm himself. It was then that he realized that the warmth was all the man needed. While watching the man clean himself up and warm himself by the fire, he realized that, “ it would be greater charity to bestow on me a flannel shirt than a whole slop-shop on him,” (80, Thoreau). The phrasing suggests to the reader, that Thoreau feels the man he would benefit more from the simple act of receiving a dry shirt; rather than just receiving an assortment of random articles of different sizes most of which would be useless to him. Also, Thoreau had helped this man by taking action and not by simply writing a check. The money may have helped him in the future, but it would have done little to keep him from freezing to death in the middle of the woods unlike the dry clothes. What Thoreau wanted us to understand was that while philanthropic donations

help, philanthropic actions help even more. This was something that was evidently on his mind, because of Emerson's gift of the land surrounding Walden Pond (Salt). There are a great many philanthropic actions that a person can undertake and be seen as sufficient in Thoreau's eyes. For example, he points out that, " some show their kindness to the poor by employing the in their kitchens," (81, Thoreau) as being a viable act of philanthropy. This belief may not seem that ground breaking, until you realize that slavery, which Thoreau was completely against, was considered a form of charity by those south of the Mason-Dixon Line, and even a few north of it. While he was living at Walden Pond, Thoreau wrote about how, " critique of charity to slavery, lauding and defending Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry in contrast to the ' philanthropy' of the slaveholder and those Northern capitalists who were implicated in Southern slavery," (Brown). Thoreau was extremely against slavery, and publically spoke out against it on multiple occasions. The fact that a majority of southern plantation owners felt that they were doing the philanthropic and charitable thing by owning slaves disgusted him. Once this fact is understood, the fact that Thoreau stated he wanted people to employ and pay those working in their kitchens takes on an entirely new meaning. He is in fact, stating that what these slave owners are doing is not only un-philanthropic, but something he considers very wrong. Thoreau had some distinct opinions about not only philanthropic acts, but those who performed them.

The acts and philosophy behind philanthropy was not the only thing that Thoreau contemplated while residing at Walden Pond. The people who

embraced philanthropy as part of their lives appeared to greatly fascinate him, perhaps because it reminded him of his friend Emerson. It is true that he expresses the belief that philanthropy is, “greatly overrated; and it is our selfishness which overrates it,” (81, Thoreau), implying that humanity as a whole tends to use philanthropy as a way to make others think well of use for donating to charity. But, that belief is overshadowed by his high esteem for those who choose to embrace philanthropy and practice at the very least small acts of it throughout their lives. This is made especially clear when he goes on to claim that, “a thousand striking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root,” (80, Thoreau), in rearguards to those who performed philanthropic acts. What he meant was that while many people are trying to make a difference, only those few who embrace philanthropy and devote their lives to it come close to really ending poverty and cruelty. It is these people that Thoreau truly seems to admire as he contemplates philanthropy at Walden Pond. He certainly thought about them while residing at Walden, where he wrote about how after a natural disaster a group of people, “collected funds to reward citizens on the Cape who braved its storms to rescue sailors and passengers who would otherwise have been lost at sea,” (Brown) showing how he felt those who had undertaken philanthropic actions should be treated. Thoreau wanted us to reward those who, despite any personal inconvenience went out of their way to help others in need, specifically by doing some sort of action rather than simply making a donation. Yet, it is this group of people that dedicate their lives and fortunes to charity whom he fears for the most. By constantly making sacrifices in their own lives in order to improve the lives of others, Thoreau

believes 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,” (80, Thoreau). In other words, he felt that while philanthropic actions are good, he does not want those performing them to overdo it. If one person takes on too much, or gives away more than they can afford to, then they may become part of the poor wretched masses they are trying to save. While Thoreau may encourage individuals to participate in more philanthropic enterprises in their lives, he does not wish for them to sacrifice their own security and wellbeing for the cause. That being said, Thoreau still values these people and what they do greatly. After all, these people had gone out of their way in order to find out what a person needed and provide them with that need. After Emerson had done a very similar thing for him by providing Thoreau with the area around Walden Pond to retreat to, Thoreau began to see this as the ultimate form of philanthropy. While residing at Walden Pond, Thoreau fully embraces the belief that he should, “ merely demand justice for all who by their lives and work are a blessing to mankind,” (81, Thoreau). What he meant was that those who dedicate their lives to philanthropy and do not attempt to gain recognition or praise from it, are the ones who deserve the most praise. This is because; they are going out of their way to help people without attempting to gain anything in return. Thoreau developed a sort of awe for those who dedicated their lives to philanthropy. He saw what they did, and the results of those actions as beautiful, and that viewpoint in itself is an incredible and beautiful thing.

When he was discussing Walden through the scope of philanthropy, there are so many factors and variables to analyze and consider. When you look at the novel from a historical perspective, it is easy to see why Thoreau was so focused on the subject, considering his ability to live at Walden Pond was one big philanthropic gesture. That fact on its own explains why he believed that philanthropy was one of humanities greatest virtues. At the same time, it explains why he was obviously in favor of philanthropic acts versus philanthropic donations. As well as his love and respect for those who dedicated their lives to philanthropic acts and why he wished only the best for them. After two years of contemplation, in many ways Thoreau, “ was a student when he came to Walden; When he returned to Concord he was a teacher,” (84, Salt). This time of reflection existed, because of an act of philanthropy towards Thoreau, and as a result leads to him forming definite opinions on the subject that he shared with the world.