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The New England Quarterly is currently published by The New England Quarterly, Inc.
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In a college essay submitted on 19 May 1837, young Henry David Thoreau wrote, “the fear of displeasing the world ought not, in the least, to influence my actions; were it otherwise the principal avenue to reform would be closed.”¹ Thoreau followed this dictum when in 1846 he was jailed for refusing to pay a poll tax destined to support American aggression against Mexico and, to his mind, the extension of slavery into the American Southwest. Thoreau’s reflections on his jailing—delivered as a lecture in 1848 and first published under the title of “Resistance to Civil Government” the following year—have elicited a variety of critical responses, several of which concentrate upon “influence”: some detail the impact of Thoreau’s essay upon such writers and thinkers as Count Leo Tolstoy, Upton Sinclair, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr.; looking back in time, others see in Thoreau’s conscientious dissent a reaction to Plato’s Crito and, as Thoreau himself makes clear, to Paley’s Moral and Political Philosophy. Figuring more positively in the formulation of Thoreau’s views were, perhaps, the individualistic outlooks of Sophocles’s Antigone, Milton’s Areopagitica, Jonathan Dymond’s Essays on the Principles of Morality, and Emerson’s

"Self Reliance" and "Politics." Thoreau seems also to have been indebted to the "non-resistant" antislavery protests of William Lloyd Garrison and Charles Lane, as well as to Amos Bronson Alcott's refusal to pay his poll tax to a government tolerant of slavery, an act that led to his arrest. Still to be addressed, however, is the Unitarian dimension of Thoreau's account of his resistance, especially with respect to his dual emphasis on conscience and consciousness.

The idea—only partly true—persists that Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government" pushes a mainly transcendental spiritualism to its sociopolitical conclusions. Transcendentalism is implicated insofar as it espoused self-reliance and celebrated the moral sentiment, yet transcendentalism was itself indebted to several key tenets of Unitarian Christianity. Notwithstanding Emerson's, Parker's, and Ripley's rejection of Unitarian rationalism and historiography, recent scholarship has detailed the aesthetic and rhetorical similarities between transcendental prose and the Unitarian sermon form and has shown that the idea of self-culture—which is central to

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Emerson’s moral vision—stems from a prior Unitarian ethic. “Transcendentalism,” we are advised, “is best seen not as a repudiation but as an outgrowth of trends in Unitarian thought”\(^5\)—an observation that can profitably be applied to Thoreau’s ideas about conscience in “Resistance to Civil Government.”

Granted, notions about the supremacy of conscience pre-dated the utterances of American Unitarians. Beyond Sophocles and Milton, one could cite Roger Williams or—with reference to the kindred issue of majorities and minorities—the Constitution, Jefferson, The Federalist, Cooper, or de Tocqueville. One must also grant that among Thoreau’s contemporaries in the 1840s were eminent thinkers—including at least some Unitarians—who thought themselves conscientious in taking a gradualist approach to slavery or in supporting the Fugitive Slave Law.\(^6\) Nonetheless, when the writings of Unitarian thinkers William Ellery Channing, John Walker, and Henry Whitney Bellows are studied in relation to “Resistance to Civil Government,” a valuable clue to an apparent and troubling contradiction in Thoreau’s thought emerges as well. Specifically, the way in which Channing and Walker equate conscience and consciousness can help us


understand how Thoreau might have justified, morally and epistemologically, bridging the extremes of the pacifism he expressed in “Resistance to Civil Government” and the defense of murder he advanced in “A Plea for Captain John Brown” (1859). Whatever consistency exists between these two works quite possibly hinges upon a rather conservative notion—but one nonetheless espoused by Unitarians and echoed by Thoreau—that the dictates of conscience correspond to universally prescribed standards of morality. In this respect, Thoreau may either be less radical than is commonly assumed or may strategically evoke certain conservative attitudes to enhance the appeal of his own views for a broad audience.

In “Resistance to Civil Government” Thoreau emphasizes the moral aspect of individualism and conscientiousness. Regarding government as a mere “expedient,” he insists that “There will never be a really free and enlightened State, until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived.” Springing from such individualism is the essay’s antimajoritarianism: “government,” says Thoreau, should cherish a “wise minority,” and individuals should be disposed, for the sake of a moral cause, to constitute “a majority of one” (pp. 73, 74). The ability to do so depends upon the “free exercise . . . of the judgment or of the moral sense” (p. 66). For Thoreau that category of the moral judgment antecedent to behavior is conscience, and this sense of the term informs his query, “Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience? . . . Must the citizen ever for a moment . . . resign


his conscience to the legislator?” (p. 65). Believing that a sort of “blood [is] shed when the conscience is wounded” (p. 77), Thoreau would have people sometimes “serve the State with their consciences also, and so necessarily resist it” (p. 66)—especially when the state demands the perpetration of a wrong: “if . . . it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law” (p. 73). Still, in his statement that “there must be some absolute goodness somewhere” (p. 69) and in his remark that “for eighteen hundred years . . . the New Testament has been written; yet where is the legislator who has wisdom . . . enough to avail himself of the light which it sheds on the science of legislation?” (p. 89), Thoreau suggests that his apparently radical outlook is actually consistent with long-established religious values; “absolute right,” he elsewhere mused, is “synonymous with the law of God.”

A related approach to conscience circulated among the Unitarian faculty at Thoreau’s alma mater, Harvard College. Indebted in part to the Scottish Common Sense philosophy and British moral theology of Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart, and Bishop Butler, such professors as Levi Frisbie, Henry Ware, and James Walker everywhere stressed humanity’s conscientious and religious faculties. In so doing, they challenged the Trinitarian denigration of human nature. By acknowledging a correspondence between moral and religious dimensions, however, they refused to credit the autonomy of ethics and conscience in human affairs. As Professor Francis Bowen remarked, an extreme reliance on ethical intuition would render moot the “necessity for divine interference, either to give additional sanction to the law itself, or to supply stronger


motives for respecting it as a rule of action.”\textsuperscript{11} A contributor to the Unitarian \textit{Christian Examiner} captured the point more succinctly: conscience “is an inherent part of man’s nature” but conscience “is, in itself, a strictly religious principle; . . . \textit{man is made, by his conscience}, a religious being.”\textsuperscript{12}

This tendency simultaneously to exalt and subordinate conscience is evident in the writings of America’s most eminent Unitarian, William Ellery Channing. While acknowledging “conscience” to be the “supreme power within us,” Channing nonetheless confirms that it possesses a “Sovereignty” that “speaks with a divine authority.” Elsewhere invoking “the divine faculty of conscience,” Channing anticipates Thoreau’s rejection of Paley’s expediential morality: “conscience . . . has stronger claims upon [us] than what is recommended as merely agreeable or advantageous.”\textsuperscript{13} Also, Thoreau’s subordination of civil authority to the voice of God manifest in private conscience finds precedent in a passage from Channing’s “Spiritual Freedom”:

\[T]\he individual is not made for the state, so much as the state for the individual. . . . The human soul is greater, more sacred, than the state, and must never be sacrificed to it. . . . \[G]overnments have tended greatly to obscure this importance of the individual, . . . to give him the ideas of an outward interest more important than the invisible soul, and of an outward authority more sacred than the voice of God in his own secret conscience.

A further parallel with Thoreau is Channing’s articulation of an “antinomian” respect for conscience: “were an individual ever called to serve his country by acts debasing to his own mind, he ought not to waver a moment as to the good which he should prefer. . . . \[F]\or no good of others ought he to . . .


violate the inward law." But precisely what this inward law is Channing does not say; instead, he implicitly relies upon a consensus of his Christian readers. Thus, beneath the apparent radicalism of Channing's thoughts about conscience lurks the sort of conservative appeal to consensus ethics that is at the center of Thoreau's defense of John Brown.

A similar perspective on conscience can be found in the writings of Henry Whitney Bellows (1814–82), a noted Unitarian minister who sought a middle ground on which to reconcile conservative and radical Unitarians. Echoing Channing and anticipating Thoreau, Bellows argued in 1842 that "Reason, including in this term what is called conscience, is God in us" and that the faculty of conscience comprises "[m]an's dignity" and "likeness to God." Within a year Thoreau would hear Bellows preach, and Emerson—with whom Thoreau regularly exchanged ideas—knew Bellows socially. We would do well, then, to review Bellows's ideas with an eye toward how they may have been considered by Thoreau. Although Bellows was more moderate than Thoreau on the subject of abolitionism, his opinions still provide striking precedent for several of Thoreau's.

In a sermon delivered in 1843, Bellows takes the stand—one well known to his orthodox antagonists—that "the individual mind is the sole interpreter of the Bible. The right of private

14 Channing, "Spiritual Freedom" (1830), in *Works*, 4:76–79.
judgment was the radical doctrine of the Reformation." Drawing a comparison between Lutheran reformers of the sixteenth century and contemporary Unitarians in revolt from Calvinism, Bellows praises the "liberty of conscience" long associated with Protestant thought. Calvinistic predestination, on the other hand, is for Bellows "an opiate to . . . conscience" which relieves "the private man" of "personal responsibility." Equating orthodox intolerance of Unitarianism with earlier Catholic efforts "to shackle all independent thinking," Bellows maintains that Unitarians "prefer the approbation of God and our own consciences to the applause of men." Nor does Bellows miss the political implications of his remarks: "What is freedom, but the freedom of the human soul? . . . It is the emancipation of thought, of conscience, which lie torpid and dead beneath the grasp of tyrannical institutions." The very language in which he expresses his ideas seems to foreshadow Thoreau's when we hear the Unitarian argue that suppressions of conscience can lead to a system where "MAN [is] buried under the state" and is left with "smothered intellect [and] . . . slumbering conscience." 18

Even if Thoreau was not familiar with Bellows’s views, the fact remains that Bellows had already pondered the higher law of conscience as an important means of distinguishing the special virtues of Unitarianism, which values individualism or "independent thinking." "The right of private judgment," says Bellows, "has its basis in the worth of the individual man." Where for his secular ends Thoreau insists that the "State . . . [must] recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived" (p. 89), Bellows calls for the "individual man [to be] recognised as more sacred than churches and establishments"; indeed, claiming that the Church and State too often "consider themselves more important than the individuals that sustain them," Bellows, like Thoreau, believes

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that "all the triumphs of freedom, whether political, social, or religious, [are] so many consequences of the resistance of the human soul . . . against the contempt, or violence of institutions which did not recognize [man's] inherent right to turn them to his account, instead of being turned to theirs."19

Implicit in Bellows's remarks is a mandate for personal responsibility among individuals. Not surprisingly he disdains dogmas and institutions that "remove responsibility from the individual to corporations." "Consciences," Bellows elsewhere remarked, "cannot be incorporated; and the common conscience of any association is a very poor one." Thoreau, too, states that "a corporation has no conscience," but he also claims that "a corporation of conscientious men is a corporation with a conscience" (p. 65). Bellows further anticipates Thoreau's position that the moral individual has a duty to defy an immoral law: "the individual man . . . is the being for whom all other things are made. . . . [N]o precepts or laws [are] valuable which do not tend to advance his rational and moral progress." Like Channing, however, Bellows subordinates ethical capacity to the religious fact that "the individual man" is the "rational and moral offspring of God."20 As for Thoreau in "Resistance to Civil Government" and, as we shall see, in "A Plea for Captain John Brown," ethics and conscience are for Bellows objectively prescriptive and compatible with the moral sentiment of humanity at large.

The objective character of the individual conscience had earlier been elaborately justified by Channing in a philosophical alignment of "conscience," "intellect," "thought," and "conscientiousness":

Does not conscience include, as part of itself, the noblest action of the intellect or reason? . . . Without power of thought [as opposed to mere sentiment], what we call conscientiousness, or a desire to do right, shoots out into illusion, exaggeration. . . . Thought, intelligence, is the dignity of a man. . . . No matter what other vocation he may have, his chief vocation is to Think.21

20 Bellows, Sermon, p. 12, and Discourse, p. 19.
Even more pertinent to what we shall explore as Thoreau's regard for conscience as an expanded form of consciousness is the way Channing draws upon the notion of consciousness to explain the idea that no "outward authority [is] more sacred than the voice of God in [a person's] own secret conscience":

Nothing seems to me so needful as to give to the mind the consciousness, which governments have done so much to suppress. . . . To me, the progress of society consists in nothing more, than in bringing out the individual, in giving him a conscious-ness of his own being, and in quickening him to strengthen and elevate his own mind.\(^{22}\)

As noted above, Bellows warned that oppressive institutions could produce a "slumbering conscience," one remedy for which is the vivified and elevated "consciousness" described by Channing. That remedy, the union of consciousness and conscience, was also prescribed by Harvard President James Walker.

In his lecture on "Conscience," Walker uses the terms conscience and consciousness almost synonymously, thereby making explicit what is everywhere implicit in the writings of Channing and Bellows: "[Humanity's] common moral nature becomes conscience, as the very name imports, only in so far as it is put forth into consciousness and activity." Like Thoreau, Walker sees such an expression of conscience—if we may momentarily adopt the French pronunciation of the word, denoting as it does a dual emphasis—as a curb upon expediency: "our sense of what is right ought to prevail, in all cases, over our sense of what is expedient or agreeable." Thoreau, you will recall, had similarly rejected ideas about "resolv[ing] all civil obligation into expediency," inasmuch as people "must do justice, cost what it may" (pp. 68, 69). Interestingly, the same phrase appears in Walker's essay, and is couched in a sentence that

highlights the connection between thinking and morality: after defining "moral thoughtfulness" as "a habit of attending to the moral aspects and bearings of things," Walker sets as a precondition for "progress in both conscience and conscientiousness" the "determination to do right, cost what it may; in other words, to moral thoughtfulness we must add an invincible moral purpose."23

Walker, we know, ultimately proved less than consistent in his political application of injunctions such as this.24 Still, his understanding of the synchrony of thought, consciousness, and conscience illuminates the role they play in Thoreau's ethics. Indeed, Thoreau's homage to individual conscience rests upon the assumption that "[i]f a man is thought-free . . ., imagination-free, . . . unwise rulers or reformers cannot fatally interrupt him" (p. 86). Little wonder, then, that for him the awakened consciousness is central to political association: "If I were consciously to join any party," he wrote to H. G. O. Blake, "it would be that which is the most free to entertain thought."25 Even in Walden "outlying and transient circumstances" pale before the permanency of "thinking" and of "conscious effort," which induce an "awakening or coming to life."26 As one critic has already observed, in Walden Thoreau associates "moral reform" with "the effort to throw off sleep."27 At issue, then, is "the degree of consciousness," a

23 James Walker, "Conscience," in Sermons Preached in the Chapel of Harvard College (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1861), pp. 137, 143-45. Inasmuch as Walker probably delivered this sermon between 1853 and 1860, during his presidency at Harvard, any "influence" of Walker's "Conscience" on Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government" is unlikely; in fact, Thoreau's influence on Walker might be a more suitable subject of inquiry. More to the point of my use of Walker's "Conscience" is the general currency of ideas that allows us better to recognize similar emphases in Thoreau's writings.

24 See Howe, Unitarian Conscience, p. 297.


lack of which leads to "unconscious despair," social and intellectual malaise, and a lack of conscientious resistance to the injustices of civil government. This dimension of Thoreau's outlook on moral reform invites speculation about two issues in particular. The first is where to place Thoreau on the continuum of ideas extending from Unitarianism to transcendentalism; the second, the way in which his moral conscientiousness establishes some degree of harmony between the seemingly disparate worlds of "Resistance to Civil Government" and "A Plea for Captain John Brown."

Although Unitarians and transcendentalists alike stressed the regenerative powers of the mind and—by extension—humanity's capacity for moral sentiment, the transcendentalists saw in the Unitarian rejection of a freely and individually functioning intuition an implicit subversion of those intellectual and moral faculties. Whereas Emerson, Ripley, and Brownson had earlier championed the intuitionalism of Immanuel Kant (and of Kant's idealistic disciples) against the passive sensationalism of John Locke and his subsequent Unitarian supporters, Thoreau appears to have seen ethical commitment as the greatest glory of the active mind. In the act of conscientious objection featured in "Resistance to Civil Government" and in his sympathetic response to John Brown, Thoreau expands upon Emerson's conception of the moral sentiment by suggesting an ethically oriented progression of ideas that originates in an intuitive grasp of morality and ends in a practical commitment to conscience, the most noble element of cognition. This marriage of epistemology and morality helps to clarify why Thoreau calls John Brown a "transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles," an "intelligent and conscientious man." By implication, people too unimaginative to appreciate Brown's moral idealism are said to possess "a dim consciousness" and, the suggestion is, to number among those leading lives of unconscious despair. Thus, Thoreau's emphasis on

28 Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 147, 8.

29 Henry David Thoreau, "A Plea for Captain John Brown" (1859), in *Reform Papers*, pp. 115, 119, 118; emphasis added. On Emerson's vision of the moral sentiment, see John Q. Anderson, "Emerson and "The Moral Sentiment,"" *Emer-
conscience takes transcendental respect for the faculties of the mind beyond speculative and idealistic musing; his conflation of intuition and "Moral Law" approaches the ethical justifications of some abolitionists.\textsuperscript{30}

Thoreau, nonetheless, remains (either on the basis of personal belief or of narrative strategy) indebted to his Unitarian predecessors. In "Resistance to Civil Government," he appears to share the Unitarians' objective and universal standards of conscientious behavior. By invoking the notion of "absolute goodness" (p. 69), by appealing to the New Testament as a guide for legislation (p. 89), and by implying throughout that morality can be determined by consensus, Thoreau makes use of the Unitarian conception of conscience as the God-given spark of divinity in man. Oddly consistent with this conception is the ethical framework of "A Plea for Captain John Brown," in which Thoreau presents a radically autonomous individual whose conscientious motives still coincide with established humanitarian and religious values: "When I think of him . . . proceeding . . . reverently, humanely to work, . . . without expecting any reward but a good conscience, . . . it affects me as a sublime spectacle." That Thoreau links "reverently" and "humanely" and later compares Brown to a crucified Christ suggests that Thoreau in some measure evokes the prescriptive ethics of his Unitarian predecessors while spurning the gradualist approach to the problem of slavery espoused by some. Were society to have as much "life"—that is, consciousness and conscientiousness—as did John Brown, then "the noblest faculties of the mind" would recognize "a man of principle, of rare courage and devoted humanity, ready to sacrifice his life at any moment for the benefit of his fellow man." Thoreau here suggests that Brown's motives—he wisely avoids discussion of Brown's

\textsuperscript{30} On the mainly intuitive basis of the "Moral Law," see Glick, "Thoreau and Radical Abolitionism," pp. 68, 224; for Glick's more general observations about the compatibility of abolitionist and transcendental thought, see pp. 228-29.
actions—coincide with the best impulses of Christian ethics.31

Still, the tension between the pacifism of "Resistance to Civil Government" and the sanction of militancy in "A Plea for Captain John Brown" might be interpreted by some readers as Thoreau's liberation from the scriptural ethics of his predecessors and his kinship with the relativistic thinking of nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers who would confront unflinchingly the ambiguities of ethics: "I do not wish to kill nor to be killed," says Thoreau, "but I can foresee circumstances in which both these things would be by me unavoidable."32 It remains unlikely, however, that Thoreau harbored the sort of extreme ethical relativism that contains within itself an implicit sanction for anarchy.33 Again, Thoreau seems to imply that were all people as conscientious as John Brown, then Brown's seeming anarchism would be subsumed within a "collective conscientiousness"—if I may modify a Jungian concept—having at its core the conjunction of consciousness and conscience that Channing, Bellows, and Walker recognized to be the link between humanity and divinity and the basis for social harmony and human dignity.34 Thoreau, after all, credits Brown with having had "a spark of divinity in him";35 Thoreau also attributes to those with a vivified consciousness the ability to understand that Brown's deed is compatible with eternally prescriptive ethics: "We... forgot human laws, and did homage to an idea. The North, I mean the


34 Truman Nelson, in "Thoreau and John Brown," in Thoreau in Our Season, ed. John H. Hicks (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1966), observes that Thoreau thought Brown "the conscience of the world. In his lens-clear view of John Brown, Thoreau came finally to realize that there is an exalted form of individualism which merges into universality and becomes one with it" (p. 152).

living North, was suddenly all transcendental. It went behind the human law...and recognized eternal justice and glory.”36 Similarly, readers inclined to surmount the apparent inconsistency of “Resistance to Civil Government” and “A Plea for Captain John Brown” may perceive beneath the seemingly polar tendencies of these works an ethic unified by the liberal Christian equation of conscience and consciousness.

36 “The Last Days of John Brown” (1860), in Reform Papers, p. 147.

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