Returning to Nature: The Importance of Moderation in the Relationship Between Nature and Human Beings

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Abstract. Recently, environmental protection becomes increasingly crucial throughout the whole world and the great concern should be focused on how to handle the relationship between human beings and nature. About two hundred years ago, Henry David Thoreau already made a creative and elementary experiment in the woods—returning to nature. Thoreau recorded his daily life there in Walden that is considered as a representative book in exploring the relationship between human beings and nature. It is considered that moderation plays an important role in Thoreauvian returning to nature and it is necessary to reaffirm the principles of Thoreauvian moderation—self-sufficiency and self-discipline, which can provide profound inspirations for modern environment-oriented life. Thoreauvian paradigm of moderation can help more people to keep it internalized.

Introduction

When it comes to Henry David Thoreau, a leading transcendentalist, and his work Walden, a reflection upon simple living in natural surroundings, it is often believed that his natural view of returning to nature means that human beings are active in establishing a harmonious relationship with nature. Through a more than two-year experiential life in woods, Thoreau pointed out that “most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them.” [2] According to Thoreau, it is the improper and ignorant desires that get in the way of individual realization of true life. That is to say, desire itself can be evil or virtuous in one way or another. Admittedly, human beings can have desires, but “it should be recognized that within the category of desire certain desires are natural, certain others unnecessary and trivial; that in the case of the natural desires certain ones are necessary, certain others merely natural; and that in the case of necessary desires certain ones are necessary for happiness, others to promote freedom from bodily discomfort, other for the maintenance of life itself.” [8] What is emphasized is that temperate desires for life are welcomed while men’s unscrupulous desires especially the excessive exploitation of natural resources for economic interests are not only unnecessary but harmful. Therefore, moderation that brings the harmony between nature and human beings becomes critical in human beings’ long-term happiness. By moderation, man is expected to lead a physically self-sufficient and spiritually self-disciplined life.

Self-sufficiency

Concerning physical life, Thoreauvian ideal of moderation refers to a simple lifestyle. However, this simplicity is not equal to retaining in the state of shortage. On the contrary, the simple life is a healthier and nobler way of existence—self-sufficiency.

First of all, self-sufficiency relates to economy. The first chapter “Economy” in Thoreau’s Walden shows that economy is a prerequisite for achieving an ecologically healthy life. For one thing, one makes use of natural resources according to the very needs. In other words, one takes when one needs, which requires people to fulfill the justifiable material expectations, as Thoreau claims in this chapter that “By the words, necessary of life, I mean by whatever, of all that man...
obtains by his own exertions, has been from the first, or from long use has become, so important to human life that few, if any, whether from savageness, or poverty, or philosophy, ever attempt do without it.” [2] Clearly, waste is prohibited in the performance of economy regardless of abundance. For another, one acts economically according to one’s capability. It is not only suggested that one ought not to waste anything that is adequate, but also it is momentous that one had better not own anything that one cannot yet afford. It is not a sensible choice to live in a big and luxurious house with the help of usury or suffocating mortgage because “with respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor.” [2] It is true that the slave of mortgage is far worse than a free man living in a small inn. Undoubtedly, as one is under the pressure of mortgage, one cannot enjoy the house at all for the pleasure with which one lives in that house may be greatly discounted by the documents of mortgage. Consequently, the big house becomes as unnecessary burden.

On a separate note, although self-sufficiency underlines temperance through economy, Thoreau did not propose the resistance of success nor comfort. Economy here means to resist any excessive necessity but not to kill the American dream to succeed. He once declared: “I intend to build me a house which will surpass any on the main street in Concord in grandeur and luxury, as soon as it pleases me as much and will cost me no more than my present one.” [3] Thoreau himself had always pursued dreams, so he did not propaganda idleness and perplex us to be self-content with an impoverished life. He just reminded us of taking realistic conditions into consideration and refuse reckless actions to trap ourselves into desperation under the name of dream.

Secondly, self-sufficiency entails labor. Surely, Walden was extensive enough for Thoreau to find food and feed himself and Thoreau could have completely depended on the existing natural resources with the strategy of economy until the very end of his experiment. Nevertheless, in a broad sense, the natural resources are bound to be exhausted sooner or later if it is exploited overly. It is unilateral to lay emphasis on economy and ignore regeneration and circulation. That is perhaps one of the most significant reasons for which Thoreau showed readers how he achieved the adequacy of food by working in the bean-field by “planting, and hoeing, and harvesting, and threshing, and picking over, and selling them,” Thoreau “might add eating.” [2] Hence a periodical mechanism of production and consumption comes into being, in which nature stays in a restorable state and thereby is always able to be overflowing with vigor. However, it is precarious to confuse labor for renewal with deliberate drudgery. The latter identifies with self-torture, which forces one to work without the sense of achievement. When a learned scholar is capable of cultivating talents and serving the society, he should not be compelled to plow in the field day in and day out. The work for renew natural resources is indispensable but not exclusive.

**Self-discipline**

In terms of spiritual activities, moderation implies self-discipline, which enables one to pay much more attention to the internal value than external value of nature after all the true love for nature is fundamentally exhibited in the appreciation of its internal beauty.

It cannot be ignored that Thoreau spared no effort to expatiate his mental activities in this work, such as reading, meditating and communicating with natural sounds. The chapter “Reading” devotes itself to the necessity of reading, by which human beings acquire the ability to think while the chapter “Sound” puts forwards that nature is full of dynamic vitality, by which nature is possessed of the ability to express itself. Finally, the chapter “Solitude” based on the former two chapters puts the emphasis on the possibility of intermediate communications by effective thinking. These three chapters are applied to construct a conditional model in which the powers of mind and the expressive power of nature are conditions while the effective thinking is the corresponding result. Thoreau highlighted this model because he wanted to show that human beings need to ponder over nature. Thoreau mentioned one of his visitors in the woods, he wrote: “I never, by any manoeuvring, could get him to take the spiritual view of things; the highest that he appeared to conceive of was a simple expediency, such as you might expect an animal to appreciate.” [2] Obviously, the visitor is negative in thinking that he just accepts what he sees in nature by his
physical eyes and is not willing to explore by his mind. Nature for him is a matter of course, whose importance and features are meaningless to him. This passivity in thought is considered as the result of the failure in self-discipline, which is an impediment to get close to nature.

Therefore, being physically self-sufficient alone cannot link the final connection between nature and human beings. Human beings have to be self-disciplined, which is a willing struggle to have mature thinking of nature. And the effectiveness of the thinking is vital in this process for it controls to some extent the subjectivity of human beings, that is, the degree to and the way in which human beings stick to moderation. Apparently, not all the subjective actions are recommendable because the so-called degree and the way are quite flexible, which decides that self-discipline has an irreplaceable say in achieving win-win relationship between nature and human beings.

To put it simply, individual self-control guarantees that one has the mind to take part in the positive thinking, which further becomes a reminder for people to be self-sufficient. Specifically, this self-disciplined consciousness in terms of the relationship between nature and human beings at least includes two parts. In the first place, Thoreau thinks that we should be clear of the significance of nature. This is self-explanatory for the whole book *Walden* has committed to the life in nature. In the second place, Thoreau deems that it is equally significant to know the law of nature, which matters the very nature of nature. In the chapter “The Bean-field”, Thoreau claimed that “I was determined to know beans.” [2] In doing so, Thoreau knew how to plant them in the right way. In Chapter Baker Farm, we see that John, one of Thoreau’s acquaints in the woods, was familiar with fishing skills—“catching shiners with fishworms, and baiting the perch with them.” [2] In chapter “Brute Neighbors”, Thoreau talked about his chickens that “when hatched by a hen they will directly disperse on some alarm, and so are lost, for they never hear the mother’s call.” [2] Those three examples evidence that nature has its own time, place and ways in different events. One may not be successful in fishing if choosing the wrong fishworms and possibly one will fail to harvest beans if watering too much for beans. Fishing and sowing may sound trivial, but they direct us to proceed to a more general point—human activities are subjected to the law of nature. The stubborn idea to take it for granted will only lead to disorder and unbalance.

**Returning to Nature for Returning to Society**

Indeed, Thoreau lived far from the society. It is nevertheless a mischievous statement that Thoreau is asocial. Thoreau claimed definitely in *Walden*: “I am naturally no hermit” [2]. And after careful investigation, we found that Thoreau could have gone to a more remote place to isolate himself from public attention. Actually, he not only carried out his experiment without the intention of eluding the public, but also deliberately exposed his experiment by publishing *Walden* since he knew that his personal experiment in nature would gain extensive attention. In this case, he did not in the least preparation to discard society. Rather, its targeted listener is not limited to Thoreau himself but the whole American society. Actually, Thoreau’s going back to nature is precisely a transformation from his personal moderation to social moderation, which is his great project of the commitment to social welfare.

Thoreau fought for an environmental-friendly society. The environmental friendship resisted extravagance of natural resources and simultaneously blindness or ignorance of environmental protection at that time.

At the first half of the nineteenth century, American economy achieved great success. Meanwhile, the well-developed capitalism also led to the universal hedonism. The money-minded ethos dominated the whole society so much so that people accumulated wealth without any consideration of natural resources, which was a potential danger that Americans did not yet come to the realization of that. Thoreau’s pioneering and experimental life in *Walden* formed a sharp comparison with the extravagant life of the rest in society, which was like a tempest hitting Americans immediately. “With the right ascetic practices, humans can realize the actual abundance of nature and thereby limit their alienated labor.” [4] This exemplary practice of moderation offered a spiritual home for the whole America. Take Don Henley for example, after reading Thoreau’s writings, Henley realized that Walden Pond deserved protection and express his strong will of
protecting that aera. Having becoming a bit influential in the circle of music and industries, Henley girded for engaging in the discussion on the issues of Walden Protection. [5] That Henley’s improved awareness of environmental protection was under the influence of Thoreau’s moderation belonged to one of Thoreau’s successful transformations. Raymond Adams once observed Thoreau as “a very public hermit,” [9] which might ratify Thoreau’s influence on the construction of a moderate society.

Apart from the fight against extravagance, Thoreau also focused on the appropriateness of measures for environmental protection. It is known from the above-mentioned analysis of self-discipline that Thoreau penetrated into the inside of nature—the law of nature, which endows natural procession with certain characteristics that are incompatible to any artificial intervention. Once human beings intend to break up the inherent natural rules, the intentional environmental protection can be transformed into environmental destruction. In 1906, a slaughter of wolves, an order given by Franklin D. Roosevelt to protect deer in Kaibab National Forest, took place in Arizona. More than six thousand wolves were killed within twenty-five years and deer increased to one hundred thousand due to the lack of enemy. Consequently, the nearby plants could not satisfy the needs for so many deer and deer began to die of starvation and illness. In 1942, only less than eight thousand deer lingered on in that forest. The tragedy of wolf and deer would not have happened if the authorities had realized the rules of predation and competition in natural world. As to that story, Thoreau was a prophet in America who made the prophecy that the lack of an active soul could cause the negligence of the law in nature, the inappropriate protective measures and the serious ecological abuse.

In addition, Thoreau struggled for social civilization by means of self-discipline. As stated earlier, active thinking is the core of self-discipline, in the process of which “thoughtful contemplation connects us with nature.” [6] Thoreauvian returning to nature inspired the American society that social civilization should be supposed to reach the same peace as that in nature. “The conjunction of cotton and slavery, dramatic and tragic, highlights the two poles of the nation’s experience in the first half of the nineteenth century: economic expansion and the social and psychic costs it exacted.” [1] Thoreau took the position that the ideal civilization in America should “not endeavor to compel you to sustain the slavery.” [2] As for the social problems in the American society, Thoreau was not didactic like a helpless moralist; instead, he turned to make comparison between natural world and human world. Thoreau is a great transcendentalist and in Walden the transcendence is embodied with his penetrating analysis of the relationship between the two worlds. The White Pond was described by Thoreau as unselfish and loving as an angel. “Successive nations perchance have drank at, admired and fathomed it, and passed away, and still its water is green and pellucid as ever.” [2] The White Pond provided inhabitants with fresh water all the time and never asked for a reward. As observed by Lao Zi, Chinese Taoist philosopher, the highest good is like water. Water benefits everything in the world but never contends for its own contribution. The unselfishness of water contrasts with the selfishness of human being. The white deprived the black of the freedom, exploited them through drudgery and even killed them for fun. It is suggested in Walden that human beings can reflect present social distorted civilization. That is why Thoreau painstakingly advised American to go back to nature, “to the perennial source of our life, whence in all our experience we have found that to issue, as the willow stands near the water and sends out its roots in that direction.” [2] It is said that one produces two, two produces three and three produces all. Both human beings and nature belong to the mentioned all. As society loses direction, it might as well learn from its company and improve itself.

Viewed from these perspectives, Thoreauvian ideal of returning to nature serves the American society well in the long run. Although the ideal is remained to come true, which results from the difficulty in the shape of civic self-sufficiency and self-discipline, it is yet pressing to start. The first step in individual moderation can bring about social moderation.

**Conclusion**

“The light which puts out our eyes is darkness. Only day dawns to which we are awake.” [2]
Dazzling light can be destructive while moderate light is comfortable. Thoreau makes it clear that only moderation can bring ecological health and eventual light to human beings who have no right to make the use of nature casually. Paul Allen Miller stated that we need “an effort to find a past that is usable for the needs of the present.”[7] To some extent, Thoreau’s ideas provide inspirations to the modern society. As is known, environmental problems also occur in China in the last few years, many of which can be dated back to human activities. Every modern man should have the awareness that “the obligation we have to self and other will then be seen not only as the products of desire.”[7] It is thought that moderation is also a viable direction emphasized by Chinese government to help solve the environmental problems. According to Environmental Protection Law of the People’s Republic of China, citizens shall raise the awareness of environmental protection, keep a low-carbon and energy-saving lifestyle and perform duties of environmental protection conscientiously. It is believed that the very slight progress in the individual’s awareness of dealing well with nature and the environment can push a leap in the whole society.

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