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How *Walden* Works:
Thoreau and the Socratic Art of Provocation

I was attached to this city by the god—though it seems a ridiculous thing to say—as upon a great and noble horse which *was somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred up by a kind of gadfly.* It is to fulfill some such function that I believe the god has placed me in the city. *I never cease to rouse each and every one of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long* and everywhere I find myself in your company.

-- Socrates, *Apology* 30e

"I do not wish to flatter my townsmen, nor to be flattered by them, for that will not advance either of us. We need to be provoked—goaded like oxen, as we are, into a trot."

-- *Walden*, "Reading"

A present-day teacher of philosophy doesn't select food for his pupil with the aim of flattering his taste, but with the aim of changing it.

– Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*[1]

Thoreau's *Walden* remains at the margins of philosophy today because we are still unsure what sort of book it is, and uncertain what we might do with it. And so it seems that, at most, *Walden* is regarded as a peculiar literary work that may lend itself to philosophical reflection, but a work that probably ought not to be considered as a work of philosophy.

But what is it that we are really getting at when we wonder whether a given work of literature is a *philosophical* work? Whether it is generally regarded as such by professors of philosophy and taught in their classrooms? Whether it treats some cluster of concepts and concerns that still engage distinguished thinkers and writers? Or must a piece of writing make advances upon some intellectual problem if it is to be regarded as

[1] *Culture and Value*, p. 17e, ed. G.H. Von Wright, Chicago, 1980.

philosophical?[2] What if a work explicitly declares itself to be concerned with wisdom, the pursuit of wisdom; will that suffice? But what if we find that work to be too simplistic or misguided? Is such a work, then, still a work of philosophy, albeit an unsuccessful one, or do its perceived shortcomings disqualify it? We might call a piece of writing a poor work of philosophy, but how bad—how unsatisfying, illogical, or poorly conceived—does it have to be before we simply don't recognize it as philosophy at all?

And what if, over time, our sense of what counts as philosophy shifts? What if certain works lose their appeal, or their significance becomes hidden to us, apparently outdated**,** in our age of specialization? How are we to tell the difference between an irrelevant work of philosophy that we can afford to ignore**,** and an untimely work of philosophy that could benefit us? If philosophy books, like philosophy teachers, should not merely flatter our taste but sometimes change it, then we are dismissive of unusual, difficult, or disturbing works at the potentially steep cost of our own advancement.

Of course, the problem of identifying a written work as a philosophical work comes back to the difficulty of grasping what the discipline of philosophy is, and what it requires of us. But this, in turn, at least presupposes the ability to recognize (and then, no less, the *willingness* to sit up and attend to) important philosophical claims and objectives when we encounter them. Our work is certainly cut out for us.

The purpose of this essay is to make the case for the philosophical importance of *Walden*, and to demonstrate that to neglect the philosophical concerns of *Walden* is not merely to miss part of the work's message, it is to miss the point entirely. To this end**,** I want to suggest that the book can be understood as a modern variation on the ancient

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[2] If so, then Kant's first *Critique* is a work of philosophy, but Boethius' *Consolations of Philosophy* is less clearly so.

literary genre of the *Sōkratikoi logoi* – the Socratic discourse – and show that the central aims of *Walden* are Socratic. For *Walden* is designed to serve as a catalyst to self examination, and employs a number of authorial strategies to assist the reader in this task. And if we allow that a crucial component of philosophical activity is this business of self-examination, then those texts that successfully foster such work ought to be regarded as important philosophical resources. In this sense, *Walden* is arguably one of our greatest philosophical aids, and deserves to be considered as one of our most valuable philosophical texts.

Gadflies Ancient and Modern

The figure of Socrates, especially as depicted in Plato's *Apology*, casts a long shadow over *Walden*. And while this may not be immediately apparent to a reader absorbed in the vivid descriptions of the woods, or focused on the details of his domestic arrangements, Thoreau inserts a number of Socratic allusions throughout his book. In the chapter, "Reading," when Thoreau objects that, "We spend more on almost any article of bodily aliment or ailment than on our mental aliment," and complains that his town of Concord "can spend money enough" on a parson, a sexton, a parish library, but not "for things which more intelligent men know to be of far more worth," (III.12)[3] we remember the Socratic admonition to his townsmen "not to care for the city's possessions more than for the city itself."[4]

Thoreau's fierce critique of our misunderstanding and misuse of wealth in the opening chapter of *Walden* is Socratic in character and intent. When he writes, **"**Rather

[3] All references to *Walden* will refer to chapter and paragraph rather than page numbers.
[4] *Apology*, 36c. All quotations of Plato's dialogues are taken from *Plato Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997).

than love, than money, than fame, give me truth," (XVIII.15) it is as if he is signaling his moral agreement with Socrates, and pledging himself to a Socratic vocation: "I shall not cease to practice philosophy, to exhort you and in my usual way to point out to any one of you whom I happen to meet: Good Sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation, and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul?" (29d). Socrates continues, "Wealth does not bring about excellence," (30a) and we hear Thoreau reiterate, "money cannot buy one necessary of the soul." (XVIII.13) Thoreau's positioning of himself into a Socratic light becomes even clearer when we recall that Diogenes Laertius reports Socrates as saying, "Those who want fewest things are nearest to the gods,"[5] and we find Thoreau stating, "my greatest skill has been to want but little," (I 93) and asking, "Shall we always study to obtain more…, and not sometimes to be content with less?" (I 52)

The underlying motive that drives both men's diatribes against those fixated with wealth and fame can be summed up by Plato's Socrates: "I shall reproach him because he attaches little importance to the most important things and greater importance to inferior things." (30a) Of primary value to Socrates is the health of the soul, and he worked to show that such health begins with the recognition and acknowledgment of the wisdom which one lacks: "surely it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know." (29b) Thoreau echoes this conviction in the midst of his assessment of the consequence of excessive labor and too little freedom: "how can he

[5] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Vol. I, II.7, translated by R.D. Hicks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

remember well his ignorance – which his growth requires – who has so often to use his knowledge." (I 6) What Thoreau here calls 'growth,' is tantamount to what Socrates calls, "the best possible state of the soul," and Thoreau sees the condition of possibility of this growth beginning with the acknowledgement that the current contours of our lives might make such health, such flourishing, impossible.

In another evocation of Socrates' mission and moral purpose, Thoreau reworks Socrates' claim that for his service to Athens, for "being such a man," he deserves to be given "free meals in the Prytaneum," an honor usually reserved for victorious athletes, since, "The Olympian victor makes you think yourself happy; I make you be happy." (36d) Thoreau writes that his city, Concord, also failed to appreciate the valuable work he performs for it. Though he had not primarily traveled about Concord haranguing men as Socrates did (his harangues would mostly come in the form of *Walden* and other writings), Thoreau makes clear his belief that his public services of "self-appointed inspector of snowstorms and rainstorms," "surveyor…of forest paths" (I 28), and waterer of "the red huckleberry, the sans cherry and the nettle tree, the red pine and the black ash, the white grape and the yellow violet, which might have withered in dry seasons" (I 29) deserved to be rewarded. However, "it became more and more evident that my townsmen would not after all admit me into the list of town officers, nor make my place a sinecure with a moderate allowance." (I 30) These apparently playful remarks nevertheless contain a serious (and Socratic) point: Socrates and Thoreau both wished to expand their townsmen's notion of public service, grow their sense of what sort of life is admirable and worth supporting. "The life which men praise and regard as successful is but one

kind. Why should we exaggerate any one kind at the expense of the others?" (I.31) The quote is from Thoreau, but the concern was registered long before by Socrates.

Plato's account of Socrates' life was occasioned by the charges raised against Socrates by some of his fellow citizens. In another gesture to the *Apology*, Thoreau opens *Walden* with the claim that he would not say so much about "my affairs," "my mode of life, which some would call impertinent" if "very particular inquiries" had not been made by his townsmen. (I.2) Such points of contact with Socratic activity are difficult to dismiss as superficial given that, for Socrates and Thoreau, the obligation to account for oneself is not just a duty brought on by the demands of others, but rather an internal requirement of a philosophical life.

Philosophy as Self Examination

For Socrates and Thoreau, *apologia* is at the heart of philosophy. The ability to account for our actions is an essential component of philosophical activity and requires extraordinary vigilance. Stanley Cavell writes, "This is what those lists of numbers, calibrated to the half cent, mean in *Walden*. They of course are parodies of America's methods of evaluation; and they are emblems of what the writer wants from writing, as he keeps insisting in calling his book an *account*."[6] But these lists are also the necessary calculations of a deliberate life lived by a "rigid economy," which Thoreau identifies as the only hope mankind has to save itself from ruin.(II.17) If this sounds extreme, it is certainly no more extreme, and in fact, is merely the upshot of the belief that, "Our whole life is startlingly moral. There is never an instant's truce between virtue and vice." (XI.10) With the stakes this high, and the responsibility to account for ourselves at every

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[6] Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.31.

instant, the half cent might just barely intimate how fine a standard of measure we are going to need. It would be comforting to interpret this claim as hyperbole, but Thoreau's primary purpose in *Walden* is not to comfort us but to wake us up, sound the alarm. This list making and budget balancing is being offered as something like the first step toward salvation. In his essay, "Life Without Principle," Thoreau counsels us to "be fastidious to the extreme of sanity," if we would not "relax a little in our disciplines," and "cease to obey our finest instincts." (p.643)

But not only is it necessary to be able to give an account, it is important to call others to account. Socrates believed that his divine calling was to "live the life of a philosopher, to examine myself and others (29a), and Thoreau charges each of his readers to "obey the precept of the old philosopher, and Explore Thyself." (XVIII 3) What is remarkable about this quote is that Thoreau's most direct invocation of Socrates comes in the concluding chapter of a book that many seem to remember primarily as an extended advertisement for the great outdoors, and a book that certainly spends a lot of time detailing one man's experiences in nature, walking through woods, bathing in ponds, listening to the night, investigating chipmunks and loons and leaves. The staunch interior focus of the final chapter is a strategic attempt to emphasize the Socratic tenor of the book and prevent the misunderstanding that we too ought to rush off into the woods. Instead he directs us to attend to our own *inner* natures: "If I were confined to a corner of a garret all my days, like a spider, the world would be just as large to me while I had my thoughts about me." (XVIII.13) (We recall, too, that Thoreau writes that just because a man walks in the woods does not mean that his thoughts are free.) Thoreau's experiences and experiments in nature are an important part of his story, but not necessarily yours.

For there is no place**,** no formula or program that will automatically transform or awaken us. (Moreover, there is no exercise, no discipline, no set of texts that will automatically initiate reflection.) It does neither you nor me any good to measure the depths of Walden pond, or to read about one who does, if we subsequently refuse to examine ourselves, to discern *our* needs, to accept our calling, to respond to that which we are summoned. “Let everyone mind his own business, and endeavor to be what he was made.” (XVIII.9)

Both men recognized how uncomfortable, how reluctant or unable most of us are to give an account of our lives. In fact, Socrates claimed that this is the true reason that he was sentenced to death, rather than the trumped up charge that he was corrupting the youth: “You did this in the belief that you would *avoid giving an account of your life*.” (39c) This resistance to account for ourselves that Socrates stresses in the *Apology* is a constant temptation away from the philosophical life. We do not wish to be roused, called into question, forced to admit our inconsistencies. (Thoreau asks, “Why is it that men give so poor an account of their day if they have not been slumbering? (II.14)) We would prefer to “sleep on for the rest of [our] days,” (*Apology* 31a), remain, in Thoreau’s words, in “the torpid state,” our “present low and primitive condition,” (I.58) unchallenged to “rise to a higher and more ethereal life.” (I.58) Push us too hard, and we will push back: “You might easily be annoyed with me as people are when they are aroused from a doze, and strike out at me.” (31a) Nevertheless, both men are ready to accept these consequences. Socrates will never “cease to rouse each and every one of you,” (31a) and Thoreau will “brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.” (II.7)

The discomfort of accounting for ourselves is a primary reason why *Walden* often elicits vitriolic reactions from its readers. Many readers of *Walden* interpret their irritation as evidence of the book's deficiencies. But this is precisely the response that an author who aims to provoke and goad his readers is attempting to manufacture. Our apparent exasperation with Thoreau is more likely the discomfort of being called out and confronted. It is the embarrassment of being caught asleep. *Walden* evokes such a strong reaction from its readers for the same reason that Socrates evoked such a strong reaction from his interlocutors: interrogation is unnerving. Thoreau, like Socrates, puts us on the defensive. In short, both force us either to defend our practices and our principles or change them, and most of us aren't prepared to do either. As Stanley Cavell has noted, these strong reactions are a crucial feature of the book, an occurrence that is so integral to the experience of reading (and reckoning) with *Walden* that it cannot be overlooked.[7] To read *Walden* without struggle, without uneasiness, is to fail to read it at all. (It would be as damning as departing from a conversation with Socrates exactly as you were before.) To be undisturbed by *Walden* is to be lost. Your annoyance or discomfort is at least the first sign that you are beginning to stir, that there is hope for you. To be infuriated, provoked, and then to begin to figure out the reasons for your infuriation, your unsettled state, this is to begin to *think*. To examine. To test and explore your beliefs and their consequences.

Philosophy and Autobiography

There are many traces of Socrates in *Walden* because *Walden* is a deeply Socratic work. But there are predominantly *traces* – suggestions, hints, and echoes of Socrates,

[7] *The Senses of Walden*, p.12

rather than detailed analyses of his methods or thought – because of the specific *kind* of *Sokratikoi logoi* that *Walden* had to be, given Thoreau's particular understanding of *apologia* and philosophical activity. *Walden* is a book that required its author (because its author requires it of *every* author) to render his account: "I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his life, and not merely what he has heard of other men's lives. (I.2) This remark stands as a particular challenge to those who would write of "Representative Men," as well as those authors of Socratic discourses, including, most famously, Xenophon and Plato. On Thoreau's view, a philosopher must eventually present his *own* account – and the failure to do this ultimately represents a personal philosophical failure, even for a writer of Plato's genius. Plato was good enough to give us Socrates, but was he good enough to have given himself?[8] In a lecture presented in the same year that *Walden* was published, Thoreau makes plain the issue: "Is it pertinent to ask if Plato got his *living* in a better way or more successfully than his contemporaries – or did he succumb to the difficulties of life like other men? Did he seem to prevail over some of them merely by indifference, or by assuming grand airs? or find it easier to live, because his aunt remembered him in her will?" (p.638) Thoreau's questions may sound audacious, but they are more earnest than arrogant. He is far from scheming up some ego-driven take down of one of the "heroic writers of antiquity." On the contrary, in *Walden* he expresses his desire "to be acquainted with wiser men than this our Concord soil has produced [that is, wiser men than Thoreau himself] whose names are hardly known here. Or shall I hear the name of Plato and never read his book?" never attend "to the wisdom of his words." (III.10)

[8] In his journal entry of October 21, 1857, Thoreau writes, "Is not the poet bound to write his own biography? Is there any other work for him but a good journal? We do not wish to know how his imaginary hero, but how he, the actual hero, lived from day to day."

Thoreau then makes specific mention of Plato's Dialogues, and laments that they go largely unread:

> His Dialogues, which contain what was immortal in him, lie on the next shelf, and yet I never read them. We are underbred and low-lived and illiterate; and in this respect I confess I do not make any very broad distinction between the illiterateness of my townsman who cannot read at all and the illiterateness of him who has learned to read only what is for children and feeble intellects. We should be as good as the worthies of antiquity, but partly by first knowing how good they were. (III.10)[9]

The strongest inference to draw here is that while Thoreau vigorously praises Plato's "heroic literary labors," (III.6) he cannot know whether Plato was a philosopher because he does not know how he lived. But this is simply to acknowledge that, in the words of Pierre Hadot, "*Discourse about philosophy* is not the same thing as *philosophy*."[10] For even the most penetrating thinkers and writers might still "make shift to live merely by conformity," but the philosopher "is in advance of his age even in the outward form of his life. He is not fed, sheltered, clothed, warmed like his contemporaries." (I.19) For Thoreau, and like Socrates, the philosopher is *atopos*, "unclassifiable," with respect to his contemporaries, and his way of life is not defined by conventional social and political categories. The philosopher is a "progenitor of a nobler race of men," and "maintain[s] his vital heat by better methods than other men." (I 70) The term Philosopher is not merely an intellectual compliment or an honorary title, but an assessment of a distinctive and exceptional way of life.

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[9] Thoreau's remark here, "...yet *I* never read them," clearly ought not to be taken at face value. For *Walden* itself contains a number of allusions to various Platonic works, including not only the *Apology,* but also the *Timaeus* (288 & 321)*, Critias* (288), and *Republic.* So this might be an insignificant rhetorical quip, or a false modesty. Or perhaps, given what he has said about the exceedingly difficult and heroic task of reading well, that in the strong sense, he cannot claim to have read—fully reckoned—with Platos' Dialogues.

[10] Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), p. 267.

Depending on how you look at it, Thoreau is either lowering the bar for who it is that might be a philosopher (after all, it is no longer necessary to hold a Ph.D., or secure tenure, or write a bunch of books), or raising the bar to nearly impossible heights (after all, it is no longer sufficient to hold a Ph.D., or secure tenure, or write a bunch of books). "Only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exercise, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive," Thoreau tells us. (II.14) But if the awake and alert individual is rare, it is not due to an uncommon lineage or exceptional innate qualities (like being born beautiful or tall), but rather, because the desire to change, to elevate ourselves, to become better than we now are, is rare, and is not fostered by our art (I.54), our routines and habits (II.21), our reading (III.8), or our political arrangements.

If we write about the ideas or actions of others, but never our own, are never prepared to show what we have made of ourselves, or what the discipline of philosophy has made of us, then our philosophical work remains unfinished. *Walden*, then, can be inspired by Socrates, but Thoreau cannot hide himself behind the figure of Socrates. *Walden* must testify to Thoreau's own mode of life. He must write his own *Apology*. And the second chapter of *Walden*, titled, "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," may be viewed as Thoreau's expansive translation of the word *apologia* itself. *Walden* is a Socratic discourse that must necessarily displace Socrates from the center. Socrates must be emulated, but not imitated. "We should be as good as the worthies of antiquity," and so must strive to equal or exceed their virtue, "but partly by first knowing how good they were." (III.10) If our lives are to be heroic, we will need the example of heroes. "The student may read Homer or Aeschylus in the Greek without danger of dissipation or

luxuriousness, for it implies that *he in some measure emulate their heroes* and consecrate morning hours to their pages." (III.3) Our philosophical progress will be assisted by biography – since we need to first learn how good the good have been – but further progress will mean that our biographical studies of Odysseus and Prometheus and Socrates must lead us to write our autobiographies – since we need to then *become* as good as them, and demonstrate that we live more wisely and by better means than others. For once one has cultivated an admirable life, it is now admirable to profess. Philosophical writing requires the turn from the biographical to the autobiographical.

Authorial Strategies of Provocation

Walden is a new type of Socratic discourse that employs certain authorial strategies to accomplish the task of waking people up and inciting self examination. In what follows, I'd like to look more closely at some of the specific ways in which *Walden* attempts to do this**,** and highlight its concerns to distinguish genuine philosophical activity from potential intellectual distractions.

Two quotes:

> There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live. To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically. "Economy," 19

> What youthful philosophers and experimentalists we are! There is not one of my readers who has yet lived a whole human life. These may be but the spring months in the life of the race.
> "Conclusion," 16

These two quotations from *Walden* are taken from the first and last chapters, respectively. Thoreau opens with the claim that there are no longer any philosophers, and closes with the assertion that we are all philosophers. It is the purpose of the sixteen

chapters that lie between these statements to direct us toward this resuscitation of the philosophical way of life.

Acknowledging Ignorance, Becoming Disoriented

For manifestly you have long been aware of what you mean when you use the expression '*being*.' We, however, who used to think we understood it, have now become perplexed.

Plato's *Sophist*, 244a, and the epigraph to Heidegger's *Being and Time*

A philosophical question has the form: "I don't know my way about."

Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* § 123

Not till we are completely lost, or turned round—for a man needs only to be turned round once with his eyes shut in this world to be lost—do we appreciate the vastness and strangeness of Nature. Every man has to learn the points of compass again as often as he awakes, whether from sleep or any abstraction. Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations.

"The Village" (2)

In the section entitled, "The Village," Thoreau writes of his return trips from town to the pond: "It was very pleasant, when I stayed late in town, to launch myself into the night, especially if it was dark and tempestuous." (VIII.2) Thoreau tells of the deep darkness of the woods, and of his ability to navigate the course home, guided by the stars, or familiar trees, or the path which he himself had worn. In contrast to his own remarkable orientation in the woods, Thoreau reports of the disorientation of the townspeople who attempted to make their way home through the woods and how easily they became lost. Thoreau then goes further still, remarking how many villagers even lose their bearings in the village: "I have heard of many going astray even in the village streets, when the darkness was so thick that you could cut it with a knife, as the saying is." (Ibid)

Walden is a book that attempts to diagnose and treat disorientation and confusion. Thoreau is doubtful that dispositions can be changed[11] but he is confident that *confusions* can be resolved. To be perplexed is to be entangled and unable to grasp something clearly, and this is the state in which Thoreau sees many of his contemporaries and his readers.

Thoreau addresses numerous types of confusion: the confusion of the individual who labors in vain, and who calls this labor a necessity (I.5); the belief that things cannot or will not change—i.e., fate; the confusion over what is truly necessary to subsist and to live richly; the "illusion" of "'modern improvements'" (I.71); the confusion over what it is that constitutes philosophy and the life of a philosopher (I.19); what it means to live freely; what it means to be philanthropic. (I.98) He claims that "shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths" (I.21); and finally, there is confusion as to what constitutes true intimacy and community. (V.5 and VI.17)

Thoreau (like Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein) is interested not just in clearing up confusions, but in the question of how it is possible to disabuse someone of an illusion. To suffer under an illusion is a very particular problem, quite different from the problem of holding a false belief on account of false information. To come out from under an illusion requires that I see things anew—or that I resist certain impulses (perhaps perceptual or psychological impulses) that grip me.

In *Walden*, Thoreau does not wish to subsume the imagination to reason. He offers a litany of examples and perspectives that work to jar the reader from his or her myopic view. His philosophical work places heavy emphasis on these pictures rather than

[11] "I confess, that practically speaking, when I have learned a man's real disposition, I have no hopes of changing it for the better or worse in this state of existence." (IV.12). See too (VII.15).

formal arguments typical of the western philosophical tradition. After all, we might ask: Are prejudices best shed by way of logical syllogisms, or by drawing someone into a familiar experience, creating an impression of being lost in a dark forest at night, fostering a sense of disorientation, and suggesting that this is how most of us live out our days?

Of course, Descartes' *Meditations* begin with a confession of confusion and doubt, and the call to "demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all...that was stable and likely to last." So Thoreau is by no means unique in addressing these particular philosophical problems, but the manner in which he attempts to convey and solve these problems is unconventional. What Thoreau demonstrates is a sensitivity to the fact that the proper *articulation* of certain philosophical problems is crucial, if the proposed solution to these problems is to be effective.

I would be willing to wager that most readers encountering the Cartesian *Meditations* feel little empathy with the scholar, sitting before the fire, claiming to question all. Conversely, who has *not* felt disoriented, anxious, and alone in the dark? It is an essential philosophical strategy of *Walden* for Thoreau to lead the reader both *by* example and *with* examples: with stories and analogies which seek to bring clarity and change. The aim of Thoreau's authorial strategy, here, is to call our lives into question and bring us to the point where our lives (and what it means to be-in-the-world) become a question for us. The philosophical importance of the experience of disorientation is that it brings us to the point of self examination. And this moment—the moment when our lives are put at issue—is the condition of possibility for philosophy.

Another unmistakable feature of *Walden* is that it is full of contradictions. Thoreau writes, “most men…through mere ignorance” can’t pluck life’s finer fruit, (I.6) but also, our growth requires that we “remember well” our ignorance. He claims, “Practically, the old have no very important advice to give the young,” (I 10) then states that the ancient authors offer “such answers to the most modern inquiry in them as Delphi and Dodona never gave. We might as well omit to study Nature because she is old.” (III.3) He proclaims, “Old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new,” (I.10) then implores us to hearken back to ancient examples of what it looks like to live well. (I 19) And he declares a reverence for “a primitive rank and savage” instinct, (XI.1) then acknowledges that this primitive instinct (in this case, to dine on animals) should be overcome. (X.5-6) In order to make sense of this, it is important to recognize that, in *Walden*, Thoreau does not always mean exactly, or only, what he says: “The heroic books, even if printed in the character of our mother tongue, will always be in a language dead to degenerate times; and we must laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line, conjecturing a larger sense than common use permits out of what wisdom and valor and generosity we have.” (III.3) As we shall see, to hurry through *Walden* is to ensure that the point of the book will be missed.

I want to argue that the abundant contradictions and paradoxes of *Walden* represent a purposeful authorial strategy, namely, to counteract two connected temptations that will forestall philosophical progress: first the temptation to stop thinking about a subject once we have puzzled out the *author’s* position on the matter; and second, the temptation to simply imitate rather than emulate an author’s principles or practices. Ultimately, *for us,* for *our* advancement, what Thoreau personally thinks about an issue is

as unimportant as how he behaves. Thoreau knows this, and so sets about making sure that we will get tripped up if we try to simply copy or mimic his behavior or his beliefs.[12] He moves us to reflect on a particular issue, but often, via contradiction and paradox, he forces us off of his trail, does not allow us to rest in the satisfaction that we have figured out *his* position or merely adopted his habit. What he wants, instead, is to provoke in us an awakening of consciousness, as well as the courage to then live by our principles.

Perhaps, then, *Walden*'s primary philosophical value lies less in the originality of the philosophical positions it puts forward than in its capacities to force us to think for ourselves. One of *Walden's* significant philosophical achievements is that it resists our efforts to pin it down to a frozen perfection and be done with it. In short, our failures to master its positions – the near impossibility of such mastery – means that our repeated efforts to think through it should throw us back into the work of self examination, throws us back upon ourselves, our thoughts, our practices**.**

If we are to make philosophical progress, we ought not to get sidetracked. But Thoreau is aware that our philosophical pursuits can go awry in a number of ways. *Walden* takes up the perennial concern that the discipline of philosophy will devolve into the production of endless commentaries on earlier books. Furthermore, it is possible to view *Walden* as a critique of speculative philosophy, as defined as theoretical reflection which does not arise out of our lived concerns or does not help us to organize our lives. In "Economy," Thoreau offers a wonderful image of "the broad, flapping American ear."

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[12] Twenty years after the publication of *Walden*, Nietzsche would wrestle with similar concerns in his *Schopenhauer as Educator* and, again later, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In his essay, "Nietzsche's Perfectionism: A Reading of *Schopenhauer as Educator*," Jim Conant writes, "In order for an exemplar to play an educative role in our lives, he must know how to defeat our tendency to want to mimic, rather than be provoked by, his example." See *Nietzsche's Postmoralism*, edited by Richard Schacht, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) p.36.

(I.71) We indiscriminately try to catch even the most trivial news, and we would rather fixate on someone else's work or condition rather than attend to our own. (This point is reiterated in (II.17), where we are cautioned "to stay at home and mind *our business*.") If we concern ourselves solely with the history of philosophy, we may never get around to reckoning with our own lives, ideas, and concerns. This would be one way to speak of the difference between the scholar and the historian on the one hand, and the philosopher on the other: for the former, the aim is a thorough understanding of historical events; the latter is interested in these historical events primarily for the sake of coming to a better understanding of himself. It is a sign of trouble, then, when we become so invested in defending a particular interpretation of some thinker or mastering a historical epoch, or getting caught up in work on "interesting" problems or questions raised by others, that self understanding and self transformation are either set aside or come to be seen as concerns for when we aren't studying or *doing* philosophy.

By settling ourselves, by minding our business and remembering our real needs, Thoreau believes that we recover a perspective that better positions us to discern reality. Hence, philosophy becomes distinguishable from sophistry, and we become less likely to confuse aimless abstraction with anchored reflection, enervating luxuries from the "necessaries of life." We might, then, define sophistry for Thoreau as that which doesn't truly concern me, demand my attention. This, of course, makes both the concepts of sophistry and philosophy subjective insofar as their content will be contingent upon what I most need, and subsequently, most need to attend to.

Conclusion

In the conclusion to *Walden*, Thoreau vividly depicts any number of actions—even the so called noblest of actions—as evasions: exploring new worlds, undertaking exotic voyages, hunting game, fighting for one's country. "Our voyaging is only great-circle sailing, and the doctors prescribe for diseases of the skin merely." (We are reminded of Socrates' comment in Plato's *Charmides* (156e) about the Grecian doctors who fail to treat the individual holistically.) Thoreau continues, "One hastens to Southern Africa to chase the giraffe; but surely that is not the game he would be after. How long, pray, would a man hunt giraffes if he could? Snipes and woodcocks also may afford rare sport; but I trust it would be nobler game to shoot one's self." Rather than target animals, Thoreau admonishes us to approach ourselves with courage, patience, stillness, and focus, all attributes that he has offered as foundational to a philosophical life.

Furthermore, as noted earlier, Thoreau enjoins us in his Conclusion to "Explore Thyself," and it might not be too much to say that if we ever did cultivate the courage to do so, we might soon discover that we deserve to be shot. Perhaps this is why, regarding this business of self examination, he writes, "Herein are demanded the eye and the nerve. Only the defeated and deserters go to the wars, cowards that run away and enlist." (XVIII.2)

Harold Bloom has said that we read great writers because they help us to accept ourselves, or show us that we are unacceptable. This remark is an apt expression of the experience of moving from Emerson's, "Self-Reliance," where we are helped to accept ourselves, in part by showing us what it means to be a "self," to *Walden*'s first chapter, "Economy," where we are shown to be unacceptable, where Thoreau's searing search

lights are trained squarely upon our frivolity, our cowardice, our laziness, and our desperation. Of course, at times, the only way that we *can* come to accept ourselves is to first be shown that we are unacceptable, so that we can identify and confront that which is unacceptable within us. This is the demanding, unending business of self examination, the work of self recovery, the first steps toward our best selves.

Thoreau's goal in *Walden* is not to produce irrefutable arguments for a handful of philosophical theories, but to goad the reader to get clearer on and account for his or her own principles and practices. Put in Emersonian terms, the intent of *Walden* is not so much to instruct, but to provoke and inspire. Hopefully, we will someday soon be able to recognize such aims as essential to the discipline of philosophy and to our own advancement.