Conscience By Henry David

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Introduction

Henry David Thoreau published “Conscience” in 1849. This is a poem that shows his perspective on life, where he describes conscience as an instinct that is bred in the house. This is actually the product of thinking and feeling, which naturally takes place inside one’s mind. He openly explains that, according to him, the idea of an ideal life is simplicity. The conscience is only worth keeping when there is happiness and life goes at a steady pace. Also, the conscience should be maintained at a level where it does not change with the changing events in life. The people who show courage are the ones actually living their lives in a worthy way. In this essay, this precise idea of conscience will be discussed in accordance with the government.

Discussion

Thoreau was of the idea that the real conscience is the one that describes the idea of good and bad, regardless of what the majority says. The government is a great example of majority rule, which is normally followed in society. Thoreau says, “Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience? – Which majorities decide only those questions about which rule of expediency is applicable? Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then?” (Page 2).

In this phrase, the author asks many questions to provoke the thoughts of readers. Here, the author illustrates why it is necessary for every individual to relinquish the authority of his conscience to the legislators and, even if they do so, why they have a conscience in the first place. However, the ideal situation is when every individual does what he considers to be right according to moral values. The feelings of control, advancement, and power should be left behind, and only moral behaviour should be carried forward. Even if the person encounters any unjust act on account of the government or any other legislative party, he must protest against it and act according to the requirements of conscience.

In societies, democracy is believed to be the right force for deciding what is good or bad for the overall society. However, according to Thoreau, it is also not right for a government to make decisions based on the majority’s decisions rather than on conscience. This raises a conflict because it argues against democracy. Actually, the author uses this argument constructively by developing a better

system of government where democracy would not be used only for justice, but conscience would also be considered a moral obligation. The viewpoint is that the system of voting is developed to provide justice, but actually, this does not result in fairness. As a result, moral damage will occur because these duties are accessible only to the individual.

The overall idea derived from all these facts is that Thoreau is against the notion of democracy. However, this may not be the case. He only deviates from the idea in some severe circumstances. The government in which there is a majority cannot serve justice for all; however, the basic rules are addressed for all, but when the rules of expediency are concerned, the majority does not play its role as required.

A thing cannot be considered right if the majority claims that this is the right thing to do. The author claims that the majority of decisions are wrong because satisfying all is not possible. It would be more just to decide laws on the basis of conscience rather than taking judgment from the majority. It is the idea implanted in the minds of every individual in a society that he must support laws. In this respect for law, people normally end up supporting legislation that is unjust, and injustice prevails in society. This problem can only be removed when people place their desire to respect their conscience rather than the law on top of it.

There are multiple arguments against the objectivity of conscience as well. Arendt says about conscience, “It cannot be generalized; in order to keep its validity, it must remain subjective; what I cannot live with may not bother another man’s conscience. The result is that conscience will stand against conscience” (Page 64). So, morality should be the standard, and this is the factor that can coincide with different individuals in a society. When moral standards are shared within society, it can be expected that the majority will unify for the collective good.

Thoreau’s view is that the majority is not naturally unjust, but using a majority in every decision should be opposed. He also advises citizens to accept injustice at a small level. This should be done when the injustice is necessarily a part of running the government. This is done so that the government can run smoothly. Otherwise, the government will wear out after some time. The person should act when he sees a citizen personally involved in an act of injustice against others. Bureaucracy should be present to some extent because this is inevitably part of government. This will ease life by making it less political.

The author is of the view that going against human rights and justice is obligatory, and it should be taken at any cost. Civil disobedience is only advocated when the human decency line is crossed. Although democracy is inadequate for a society to have justice, removing it altogether is not possible. Rather than supporting “no government”, the society should go for “better government”.

It is not entirely possible for a government to act with conscience. However, to increase the level of effectiveness, the majority rule should be followed in some cases. It is important to have proper checks and balances; otherwise, the state will be paralyzed from a political point of view, and it will become impossible to govern. Bahmueller says, “For centuries, writers on democracy have

recognized the potentially overwhelming power of majorities and, fearing a ‘tyranny of the majority’, have sought ways to lessen its influence” (page 23). This shows that democracy and government face hindrances while enforcing justice, but it is not an inherently unjust mechanism. It has its own benefits and can prove beneficial if worked on properly.

Democracy should be reversed only when there is no other way left. The most likely condition is when human rights are revoked because this is not a tolerable act in terms of justice. The law should not be obeyed for the sake of it, but it is only the moral obligation of an individual that allows him to follow the rules enforced by law. It should be according to the will of a person what type of law he needs to obey, but sadly, this is done by force.

Conclusion

Consciences play a vital role in shaping behaviour. The majority rule in a society should be followed if it is morally correct. Rationally, it is not possible for a government to act according to conscience, but in some decisions, conscience can be considered. Democracy is not entirely a failure, but by pointing out the problems in this system, people will focus on reaching the ideal level of conscience.

Works Cited

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