



Critical Thinking Sample Solutions

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I heartily accept the motto: "That government is best which governs least"; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically.

Paraphrase: "The most effective form of government is one that establishes the least number of rules, regulations, and laws, so that people are as free as possible to make their own decisions and live in the ways they see fit. The U.S. government is not yet living up to this ideal and I, Thoreau, would like to see the government moving toward that ideal more quickly and more methodically."

Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe: "That government is best which governs not at all;"

Paraphrase: "The ideal form of government is one that places no rules and regulations on people whatsoever."

and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have.

Paraphrase: When people can live rationally, respecting the rights and needs of others as a matter of course, making reasonable decisions in thinking through issues and problems, when they rise above needing to be restrained, they will then demand a government that doesn't interfere with their ability to live life as they so choose.

Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient.

Paraphrase: Government, at best, is a necessary evil, a contrivance that is useful in the short run. But most governments typically are not useful and beneficial to people, and all governments sometimes fail to serve the people usefully.



Can there not be a government in which the majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?

Paraphrase: Is it possible to be governed in such a way that one can decide for oneself what is right or wrong, based on one's ethical sense of right and wrong, rather than having a government dictate what is right or wrong based on what most people think?

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? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward.

Paraphrase: Individual citizens should never, under any circumstances or at any time, give up what they know to be ethically right and instead allow legislators to decide what is right. Why do people have the intellectual ability to figure out what is right and wrong if they are not willing to live in accordance with their sense of what is right? Doing what one deeply judges to be right takes precedence over doing what governments say we should or must do.

It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume, is to do at any time what I think right.

Paraphrase: It is much more important for people to develop a respect for and understanding of what is right than to uncritically adhere to laws (which may be unjust). The only thing that people are really obligated to do is what they think is right, not what the law says is right. (Of course, this assumes that people understand ethics, and can distinguish it from cultural norms and values.)



Explicated Thesis of the Text

Statement of the Thesis:

All governments tend to abuse power, generate laws, and make decisions that unduly restrict people's freedom. Therefore, people are best served by governments that govern as little as possible. When people are able to live without being governed, they will demand to live without government. Moreover, people need to behave more in accordance with their conscience than in accordance with the law. If a law requires you to behave in an unjust way toward another, you are ethically obligated to break the law.

Elaboration of the Thesis:

Though a democratic government is chosen by the people to carry out the will of the people, it is far too easy and common for governmental power to be used for purposes of vested interests rather than for the best interest of the people. When this happens, the rights of the people are subverted. Therefore a minimalist type of government is the best. But people can have such a government only when they think well enough to demand it and can live rationally without unnecessary governance. Some laws might be considered necessary evils, because to change such laws would lead only to greater injustices than the original law. But if the only way to change a truly unjust law is to refuse to abide by the law, a person of conscience will refuse. People should be willing to sacrifice themselves to reduce injustice caused by unfair laws.



Explicated Thesis of the Text

Exemplification of the Thesis:

An example for people breaking the law in pursuit of justice can be seen in the issue of slavery in the U.S. in the 1800s. After slaves in the north were freed, many people helped slaves on southern plantations – willing to rather break the law than abide by an unjust law.

Illustration of the Thesis:

Governments abusing power and doing what is in their interest rather than the interest of the people is similar to Enron executives in 2001 being engaged in widespread accounting fraud to mislead investors and inflate stock prices.

To illustrate the idea of acting against an unjust law, look at peer groups, where group conformity and peer pressure – as an “unwritten law” - can lead to bullying of “outsiders” like immigrants or citizens with disabilities. Acting against this peer pressure and acting against this bullying is similar to the ethical behavior Thoreau is calling for.

