

1) In your own words (and using quotes from Genesis as it's helpful), describe the theory of personhood that is offered in Genesis. We discussed this in class, but test yourself now by trying to put it in your own words. If it's helpful to compare the picture of a person that we get from Genesis to the one in the Hymn of the Cosmic Man to help express your point, feel free to do so.

In Genesis I, we're offered the theory of creation that places humans as the stewards of existence. God speaks all into existence, and when God speaks about the person, God says this:

“Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

The idea of ruling over all creatures that move is something that has driven Christian movements for centuries. European expansion into present-day America is lined with the Christian undertone of land ownership and entitlement. However, this is something that equates all people that exist, the idea that we were all still created equal to equally rule over the land. The Brahmanian story of creation tells a story of sacrifice in order to create all existence from the same cosmic being, Purusha, however, the Hymn of the Cosmic man clearly details the Caste system and predestination such that when someone is born into a certain caste, they have a role to play for their entire lives that falls in line with those ideas. What the Hymn of the Cosmic man does not do is place the person above or below the animal or land or any other aspect of existence. Instead it evokes an empathy for all beings, as we are all woven from the same thread.

2) Think about what you yourself have been taught are the key distinguishing qualities of human beings, and/or about how other students and teachers from your high school might answer this question (if what you were taught is different than what the majority of people at your high school might think). Do you see any or all of these qualities as directly reflecting aspects of the theory of personhood offered in Genesis, or logically following from the idea of personhood that's contained there? Use examples and explain.

From birth, I have been raised Hindu, and have followed Buddhist thought over the past several years; the ideas of human supremacy presented in Genesis mostly contracts Buddhist ideas about existence. In Genesis 1, God speaks soul, life, and purpose into all humans and beings alike all at a single event described as the creation of the universe. A central idea of Buddhist philosophy is the cyclic nature of existence, worlds rise and pass without a single divine creator or event, and all beings exist in a state of flux. Another central idea to Buddhism is that of Suffering, which Buddhism again does not trace back to a single event, but rather something that is inherent to being, with cycles of rebirth, desire, and attachment. In my mind, it would be foolish to put humans at the center of any universe or world, or to bring harm to a fellow animal or person based on ideals of supremacy. This for example, is why I am still vegetarian to this day, based not off religious ideals, but moral principle.

3) In Walking, Thoreau is not simply describing his experiences and what he personally believes makes for a good and pleasant life. When he talks about nature and walking, he means it literally to an extent. But he also uses these as metaphors and deploys them symbolically to evoke states of mind and other kind of action. Thoreau's goal in the essay is to persuade the reader that one way of living is better than another and that people with certain qualities and sensibilities are superior to others.

--What personal qualities (qualities of personhood) is Thoreau elevating in this essay and trying to convince his readers to themselves adopt? What qualities of personhood is he trying to persuade his readers to reject?

--How/where does he invoke God or Christian religious authority in this essay to convince his readers of the superiority of the persons/qualities/lifestyles he is extolling? (provide quotes and page numbers)

i) In Walking, Thoreau uses nature and walking both literally and metaphorically to express his views on life and the qualities he is trying to persuade his readers to adopt/reject. I think that he seeks to elevate ideas of individual identity and simplicity, Thoreau, like Buddhist thought, asks you to disconnect yourself from material attachment and complexities, and simply yield yourself to nature, which is his second big ideal, a connection to nature.

On the other side he seems to reject ideas of “pasteurization.” He implores the reader to reject the tendency to naturally conform to societal norms without question or fall victim to the material trappings of the modern world. Thoreau asks the reader to not subject themselves to the domesticated life, but rather one that is inherently wild.

ii) Thoreau also occasionally invokes religious authority in his essays to convince his readers, in fact, he does this in the very first paragraph:

“I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one, for there are enough champions of civilization: the minister and school committee...” (1)

He tells us that the church is one of the tools of domestication present in today’s civilization, imposing rules on our lives that combat the idea of wildness and a connection to nature. Genesis 1 tells us that we rule over nature, Thoreau says we must yield ourselves to it. On page 2 he says:

“No wealth can buy the requisite leisure, freedom, and independence which are the capital in this profession. It comes only by the grace of God. It requires a direct dispensation from Heaven to become a walker. You must be born into the family of the Walkers.”

Here Thoreau is emphasizing the divinity of walking, he suggests here that the idea of sauntering is not merely a physical act, but a spiritual one, and this is what is at the core of his arguments for wildness.

4) Walking is often discussed as an early exemplar of an attitude that we now refer to of as environmentalism. However, it is equally or more an argument that exemplifies what was (and commonly remains) an ideal of personhood that Americans have long claimed is distinctive of the U.S. as a nation: individualism. How (where) do you see individualism operating as value in this essay?

I agree that it is a call for environmentalism, Thoreau says, “Nowadays almost all man’s improvements, so called, as the building of houses and the cutting down of the forest and of all large trees, simply deform the landscape, and make it more and more tame and cheap.” However, this is merely a cursory view of Walking. Thoreau really argues here for the individual, and his ideas of personal freedom, independence, and self-reliance are distinctive to American societal ideals. Individualism is the core value of this essay. It is only “If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again, — if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man, then you are ready for a walk.” The idea of walking is a celebration of the individual’s journey, as when one is ready to walk, they have detached themselves from what strips us of individualism.