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Break It

This year, because of the coronavirus pandemic, everything has moved online. Schooling happened on Zoom, people worked from home, and people started chatting online more. All of this relies on computers and computer networks, and the method of thinking that comes with them, which have all become increasingly important in our society. In a normal year, people would still use computers, and they would drive a car. And yet, people may not understand, or even try to understand, what happens and how these commonly used devices and machines work, either due to fear of overcomplicated explanations or lack of interest.

Abraham Lincoln argues that for a man “to violate the law, is to trample on the blood of his father, and his sacred honor” (4), but Henry David Thoreau claims that that is wrong, and that people should not blindly follow the law, but rather, do what they understand to be right: “the only obligation which he has a right to assume is to do at any time what I think is right” (2). Lincoln agrees with Thoreau on this point: “Let me not be understood as saying that there are no bad laws ... bad laws, if they exist, should be repealed as soon as possible” (4). He agrees that there are bad laws, and that they should be repealed. Thoreau states that if he obeyed the law completely, and rendered “injustice unto others”, then he should “feel as if he were worth less in that case”, and that it would “cost him less ... to incur the penalty of disobedience ... than it would to obey” (8). This understanding of how things work allows people to “act on principle” and work from their understanding of how things work to try and improve things. Some people

blindly use devices and follow every day procedures that they treat like laws and treat violating these “laws” like “trampling on the blood of their fathers”. However, in reality, people need to do what “they think is right” because otherwise, they might “feel as if they were worth less”. Adam Dachis advocates for understanding how something works, and not just blindly following procedures: “When you understand how something works, you can alter that knowledge and adapt it for your best uses. This gives you confidence and the ability to grow.”

While not obeying the “law” and trying to understand how things work might have a cost (for example, because a mistake happens), it would “cost less than it would to obey”, as “obeying” the “law” and just blindly using the things people use everyday robs people of their chance to “alter their knowledge of how something works and adapt it for their best uses”.

Thoreau once wrote, “The mass of men serve ... not as men mainly, but as machines ... In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgement or of the moral sense” (2). How do people “repeal”, or change, these “bad laws”, or procedures, and stop blindly following them, like machines with not judgement? In order to “repeal” these “bad laws”, people need to understand what they do and how they work. The same is true for everything that people interact with in life: there are bad devices: they should be fixed; there are bad procedures: they should be amended. Only once people truly understand how things work and why bad things are bad can they improve them and make them better.

In order to make things better, whether behind the wheel in a car, or behind a computer screen, in school, or in a bank, people should “act with principle” and understand how the things they use every day work. The “laws” and procedures that people follow every day when interacting with their devices and machines are really only guidance, and are meant to be “disobeyed” if people believe they have a better way of doing things.

Dachis quotes Martin Rue: “Once you can reason about something in your mind you can contemplate why it is the way it is, you can apply your entire creative mind to making the most of it, and you can implement and question improvement – you own it intellectually.”

In the same way that Thoreau advocates for the improvement of the government through his understanding of how the government should be, and how Lincoln advocates for the protection of the law through his understanding that for a man “to violate the law, is the trample on the blood of his father” and both were arguing for the improvement of society, today, people need to understand how the things they use every day work and use that understanding to develop and improve those things. Not doing so will lead to a failure to improve and innovate in a time when that innovation is greatly needed.

Many people use computers and other devices and machines (like cars and phones) every day. Some people don’t try to understand them, but still attempt to use them to attain success, and because of this, they might “feel as if they were worth less”, because they have to ask someone who does understand for help. Asking questions itself may not be a bad thing; actually, it can help people think more about the things they’re asking questions about, like how Thoreau asks questions about whether this is actually how the government should work. However, some people ask questions with a hope of getting an easy answer that leads them to success. This is unlikely, as not understanding how the things they use work makes people less effective at using them. One cannot be on the road to success and innovation without having an understanding of the car they are using to get there.

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