Directions: As you read the following essay by Henry David Thoreau complete the questions in the text to evaluate the author’s argument.

Disgusted by a government that permitted slavery, Thoreau refused to pay his poll tax and as a result was put in jail. The following excerpt describes his thoughts about being punished by a government that he disagreed with and thought was unjust.

Civil Disobedience--Henry David Thoreau

I know this well, that if one thousand, if ten men whom I could name,—if ten honest men only, --yes, if one HONEST man, in this State of Massachusetts were actually to withdraw from his government that allows slavery, and be locked up in the county jail therefor, it would be abolition of slavery in America. For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done forever…

1. Why do you Thoreau reduces the number of people who can have an impact on slavery being legal from one thousand men to ten to one?

I have paid no poll-tax for six years. I was put into a jail once on this account, for one night; and, as I stood considering the walls of solid stone, two or three feet thick, the door of wood and iron, a foot thick, and the iron grating which strained the light, I could not help being struck with the foolishness of that institution which treated me as if I were mere flesh and blood and bones, to be locked up. I wondered that it should have concluded at length that this was the best use it could put me to, and had never thought to avail itself of my services in some way. I saw that, if there was a wall of stone between me and my townsmen, there was a still more difficult one to climb or break through before they could get to be as free as I was. I did not for a moment feel confined, and the walls seemed a great waste of stone and mortar. I felt as if I alone of all my townsmen had paid my tax. They plainly did not know how to treat me, but behaved like persons who are underbred.
2. What is the author’s reaction to being locked up? Why does he feel that way?

In every threat and in every compliment there was a blunder; for they thought that my chief desire was to stand the other side of that stone wall. I could not but smile to see how industriously they locked the door on my meditations and thoughts, which followed my jailors out beyond the stone walls of my prison.

3. Paradox: Why does Thoreau NOT feel confined in prison?

As they could not reach me, they had resolved to punish my body; just as boys, if they cannot come at some person against whom they have a spite, will abuse his dog. I saw that the State was half-witted, that it was as timid as a lone woman with her silver spoons, and that it did not know its friends from its foes, and I lost all my remaining respect for it and pitied it.

4. Why might Thoreau include this anecdote about the boys and the dog?

When I came out of prison,—for someone interfered and paid that tax,—I did not perceive that great changes had taken place in the town, such as he observed who went in a youth and emerged a tottering and gray-headed man; and yet a change had to my eyes come over the scene,—the town, and State, and country,—greater than any that mere time could effect. I saw yet more distinctly the State in which I lived. I saw to what extent the people among whom I lived could be trusted as good neighbors and friends; that their friendship was for summer weather only; that they did not greatly propose to do right; that they were a distinct race from me by their prejudices and superstitions, as the Chinamen and Malays are; that in their sacrifices to humanity they ran no risks, not even to their property; that after all they were not so noble but they treated the thief as he had treated them, and hoped, by a certain outward observance and a few
prayers, and by walking in a particular straight though useless path from time to time, to save their souls. This may be to judge my neighbors harshly; for I believe that many of them are not aware that they have such an institution as the jail in their village…

5. Analyze the repetition of the clauses beginning with “that” in the long sentence. Explain 2 criticisms Thoreau has of his neighbors.

If others pay the tax which is demanded of me, from a sympathy with the State, they do but what they have already done in their own case, or rather they abet injustice to a greater extent than the State requires. If they pay the tax from a mistaken interest in the individual taxed, to save his property, or prevent his going to jail, it is because they have not considered wisely how far they let their private feelings interfere with the public good…

The authority of government, even such as I am willing to submit to,—for I will cheerfully obey those who know and can do better than I, and in many things even those who neither know nor can do so well,—is still an impure one; to be strictly just, it must have the sanction and consent of the governed. It can have no pure right over my person and property but what I concede to it. The progress from an absolute to a limited monarchy, from a limited monarchy to a democracy, is a progress toward a true respect for the individual. Even the Chinese philosopher was wise enough to regard the individual as the basis of the empire. Is a democracy, such as we know it, the last improvement possible in government? Is it not possible to take a step further towards recognizing and organizing the rights of man? There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly. I please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor; which even would not think it inconsistent with its own repose, if a few were to live aloof from it, who fulfilled all the duties of neighbors and fellow-men. A State which bore this kind of fruit and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which also I have imagined, but not yet anywhere seen.
6. What does Thoreau envision as a truly just government?

Part II: Evaluate the writer’s argument with a paragraph. Does Thoreau persuade you that one person can have an impact on his / her government? Explain why or why not. Use examples from your own life and history to support your answer. Make sure your first sentence identifies your claim about the effectiveness of the author’s argument and uses a “because” statement to support your opinion.