

Ralph Waldo Emerson



Essays *The Transcendentalist*

A Lecture read at the Masonic Temple, Boston, January, 1842

The first thing we have to say respecting what are called *new views* here in New England, at the present time, is, that they are not new, but the very oldest of thoughts cast into the mould of these new times. The light is always identical in its composition, but it falls on a great variety of objects, and by so falling is first revealed to us, not in its own form, for it is formless, but in theirs; in like manner, thought only appears in the objects it classifies. What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842. As thinkers, mankind have ever divided into two sects, Materialists and Idealists; the first class founding on experience, the second on consciousness; the first class beginning to think from the data of the senses, the second class perceive that the senses are not final, and say, the senses give us representations of things, but what are the things themselves, they cannot tell. The materialist insists on facts, on history, on the force of circumstances, and the animal wants of man; the idealist on the power of Thought and of Will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture. These two modes of thinking are both natural, but the idealist contends that his way of thinking is in higher nature. He concedes all that the other affirms, admits the impressions of sense, admits their coherency, their use and beauty, and then asks the materialist for his grounds of assurance that things are as his senses represent them. But I, he says, affirm facts not affected by the illusions of sense, facts which are of the same nature as the faculty which reports them, and not liable to doubt; facts which in their first appearance to us assume a native superiority to material facts, degrading these into a language by which the first are to be spoken; facts which it only needs a retirement from the senses to discern. Every materialist will be an idealist; but an idealist can never go backward to be a materialist.

Lydia Maria Child

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from Letter 13

You ask me what *is* transcendentalism, and what do transcendentalists believe? It is a question difficult, nay, impossible to answer, for the minds so classified are . . . without any creed. The name is in fact applied to everything new, strange, and unaccountable. If a man is a non-conformist to established creeds and opinions, and expresses his dissent in a manner ever so

slightly peculiar, he is called a transcendentalist. It is indeed amusing to see how easily one may acquire this title. A southern lady lately said to a friend of mine [Margaret Fuller?], "I knew you were a transcendentalist the first half hour I heard you talk." "How so?" inquired my friend. "Oh, it is easy enough to be seen by your peculiar phrases." "Indeed! I had though my language was very plain and natural. Pray what transcendentalist phrase have I used?" The first time I ever saw you, you spoke of a person at the North as unusually gifted; and I have often since heard you use other transcendental expressions."

If you wish to know the origin of the word transcendentalism, I will explain it, briefly and simply, as I understand it.

All, who know anything of the different schools of metaphysics, are aware that the philosophy of John Locke was based on the proposition that *all* knowledge is received into the soul through the medium of the senses; and thence passes to be judged of and analyzed by the understanding.

The German school of metaphysics, with the celebrated Kant at its head, rejects this proposition as false; it denies that all knowledge is received through the senses, and maintains that the highest, and therefore most universal truths, are revealed within the soul, to a faculty *transcending* the understanding. This faculty they call pure Reason; it being peculiar to them to use that word in contradistinction to the Understanding.* To this pure Reason, which some of their writers call "The God within," they believe that all perceptions of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, are revealed, in its unconscious quietude; and that the province of the Understanding, with its five handmaids, the Senses, is confined merely to external things, such as facts, scientific laws, &c. This idea of an inwardly revealing faculty, transcending mere intellectual perception, will naturally remind many of the "inward voice," believed in by the Society of Friends . . .

[But] there is slight resemblance between Quakers and Transcendentalists. The former abjure imagination and the Arts, and love to enclose everything within prescribed rules and regulations. The latter luxuriate in the beautiful, and their theories are . . . expansive and indefinite. . .

*This distinction is strong in Coleridge's interpretation of German idealism. It is not an entirely accurate reading of Kant. – JB