

# INCEPTION AND GROWTH OF TRANSCENDENTALISM AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURALISM

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## ABSTRACT

Transcendentalism which started as a movement during the second quarter of nineteenth century in reaction to 18th Century rationalism, developed into a school of thought and its influence continued to penetrate into both religion and literature. It is interesting to note that transcendentalists seem to have been inspired by the Hindu ideology, as there is a strong oriental tint in their approach. Moreover, Transcendentalists in their thinking about religion and the world, in some aspects, appear to be very close to the naturalists as both of these school of thoughts have some common features.

## INTRODUCTION

Something strange had happened in American historiography, when Transcendentalism, once a mainstay of surveys of American thought, virtually vanished from the historical radar till some public intellectuals like Stanley Cavell, Irving Howe, and George Kateb made this phenomenon of transcendentalism as leading as Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Theodrou had done.

Transcendentalism continued to pour down from major sources but neither critical acclaim nor academic productivity could keep the history of this movement continuous and as a historical movement, transcendentalism entered into a long eclipse.

Around 1890s something extraordinary happened to American novel when what is called Naturalistic movement began to gather momentum. No wonder, it was under the scandalous and ambiguous effects of science that the true character of naturalism could not be determined.

This research considers how correspondent the transcendental point of view is with the naturalistic attitude and argues that despite, apparently contrary to the transcendentalism, naturalism dichotomy is neither exclusive nor exhaustive. It may be possible for someone of being a transcendentalist and naturalist at the same time. The dichotomy is not exhaustive either, since it is possible to develop a philosophy which is descriptive of reality and yet is neither transcendental nor naturalistic.

## 1. INCEPTION AND GROWTH OF TRANSCENDENTALISM

Transcendentalism, a religious and philosophical movement, developed in the Eastern region of America during the late 1820s and 1830s as a protest against the general state of culture and society with some specific view on religion and politics as related below.

### 1.1 Transcendentalists view on religion and politics

Transcendentalists believed that society and its institutions particularly organized religion (Churches- religion gatherings) and political parties ultimately corrupted the purity of the individual. They had faith that people are at their best when truly "self-reliant" and independent. It is only from such real individuals that true community could be formed. Among transcendentalists' the core belief was the intrinsic goodness of both people and nature.

### 1.2. Transcendentalism vs rationalism

Transcendentalism, which came into being as a reaction against 18th Century rationalism, is fundamentally a diversified source of the variety of Hindu texts like the Vedas and the Gita and various religions and also of the German idealism.

The publication of Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1836 essay *Nature* is usually considered the cusp moment at which transcendentalism became a major cultural movement.

Emerson in his speech "The American Scholar" delivered in 1837 writes:

"We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds... A nation of men's will for the first time exists, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men." Emerson closed the essay by calling for a revolution in human consciousness to emerge from the brand new idealist philosophy:

„So shall we come to look at the world with new eyes? It shall answer the endless inquiry of the intellect, what is truth? Moreover, of the affections, what is good? By yielding itself passive to the educated, Will. ...Build, therefore, your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions. A correspondent revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit.“

While examining this movement for its creativity and limitations throughout the nineteenth century, it is interesting to note the ways in which these writers and cultural reformers attempted to spread their ideas and visions of a new world.

## 2. Chief Features of Transcendentalism

While discussing on the transcendentalist movement, it will not be appropriate to overlook its chief features, so they are described in the lines that follow.

### 2.1. A Peace Loving Movement

The idea behind the activities of the Transcendentalists is a peaceful change. They believed in the importance of leading. Instead of a direct overthrow of the existing order or forcing people to comply with new standards, the Transcendentalists largely believed in a peaceful revolution for instant, the way one lived, thought, and interacted with the world would become a model for others. An exemplary life would inspire others to live in a new way.

### 2.2. Transcendentalism and Society

Frederic Henry Hedge argued in his approach titled as "The Art of Life" which appeared in *The Dial* in October 1840, contributing the Transcendentalists over how

much one should withdraw from society or remain part of the larger community. Hedge writes in his work "The work of life"; so far as the individual is concerned, and that to which the scholar is particularly called, is self-culture,--the perfect unfolding of our individual nature. To this, end above all others the art, of which I speak, direct our attention and point our endeavour... But the business of self-culture admits of no compromise. Either it must be made a distinct aim, or wholly abandoned."6 In the next paragraph, Hedge wrote, "Of self-culture, as of all other things worth seeking, the price is a single devotion to that object--a devotion which shall exclude all aims and ends, that do not directly or indirectly tend to promote it."7 Here he is reaffirming the idea of self-culture that is found throughout early American thought.

### 2.3. Transcendentalism and Education

The emphasis on education and self-culture was the impulsion behind the Transcendentalists' actions of journaling, conducting conversations, publishing, and lecturing on the lyc ee circuit. Through these acts, they helped others in the process of building self-culture by modelling cultivated living and thinking.

The use of the journal not only provided a detailed exposition of what the members were contemplating, but the use of the journals also helped to support the idea of spontaneity, which was one of the important values of the Transcendentalist movement. On 19 August 1851, Thoreau describes keeping "[a] meteorological journal of the mind." The significance of the journal is to record the manifold happenings of the mind, the instantaneous reactions to one's environment.

Moreover, the use of a journal helps to support Emerson and Fuller's introduction to the reader in *The Dial* when they asseverate that "everything noble is directed on life." They further asserted that "criticism should be poetic; unpredictable; superseding, as every new thought does, all foregone thoughts, and making a new light on the whole world." Toward the end, they describe the periodical as a "discourse of the living." Thoreau's description of a

"meteorological journal of the mind" encapsulates this "discourse of the living." The use of a journal, then, helped to support an ideological position that privileged liquidity, motion, and newness over more rigidified ways of living and thinking.

#### 2.4. Transcendentalist Approach towards the World

Kantian transcendental philosophy has shown that we can never decide the question of whether or not the world is infinite in space and time, because, in the field of appearance, the world as a totality of consistent experience "does not exist as [an

unconditioned] whole, either of infinite or of finite magnitude." However, appearances are encountered in a world, in which one aspect of a thing always invites us to consider others, indicating thereby a road to infinity. According to a discovery of transcendental phenomenology, every single thing contains in itself "a continuum of appearances," which exhibits an "all-sided infinity."

From this, an important result can be taken: although the world as a physical universe may turn out to be finite, the world as the totality of concordant experience must be regarded as an infinite. It is in a sense that, in his Cartesian Meditations, Edmund Husserl defines the world as "an infinite idea, related to infinity experiences." It is clear, however, that we can draw only upon a finite quantity of concordant experiences in order to represent this infinite idea.

That is why philosophy as a world project necessarily exhibits a deeply paradoxical structure: although it relies upon a finite quantity of concordant experiences, it projects an infinite idea into being. This paradoxical structure makes it clear why there are always different possible world projects. This is the case because a finite quantity of concordant experiences is resolvable with different infinite ideas, therefore, no accident that different world projects often enter into conflict with one another. In their conflicts, they give rise to ever new world projects. There is no hyperbalance in saying that the last source of historicity is the interlace of finitude and infinity in the paradoxical structure of world projects.

### 3. Metontological Transcendentalism

By "transcendental philosophy", we usually mean the result of a "Copernican revolution" in metaphysics, which, in his *Reflections on Metaphysics*, Kant characterizes concisely: "The subject instead of objects." Indeed, in all of its different versions, transcendental philosophy is aimed at a world project in which an appropriate place is assigned to subjectivity. Yet it would be a lethal error to reduce transcendental philosophy to metaphysics of subjectivity.

It cannot be denied, however, that a transcendental approach is always jeopardized by subjectivism and idealism.

#### 4. Transcendentalism and the Naturalism

The above mentioned Kant's doctrine of transcendental perception may be said as leading up to a subjectivism in metaphysics. For, according to this doctrine, the structure of self-consciousness decides a posteriori on the question of what an experience has to look like in order to be able to emerge. It is in this sense that, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the following statement has been taken:

"There is one single experience in which all perceptions are represented and are orderly connected. When we speak of different experiences, we can only refer to the various perceptions, all of which, as such, belong to one and the same general experience."

Transcending life by adapting the concepts of Franklin, Emerson and Thoreau

everyone one of us struggles daily to survive in a manner befitting our individual beliefs, hopes, aspiration, dreams and goals but there is not a universal code on how exactly we should go about doing this by experiencing it accordingly and properly.

Man learns that Nature is inspiring awfully, full of power and dangerous beauty. Man is limited by nature's boundaries; there are some places in Nature that man is incapable of cross -too daunting emotionally or simply a physical impossibility, as it was for Thoreau in *Ktaadn*. in "Walking" observes, "For my part I feel that with regard to Nature I live sort of a border life, on the confines of a world into which I make occasional and transient forays only.

" Man is so insignificant in the face of nature, our existence is untenable: Thoreau's "House-Warming" Nor need we trouble ourselves to speculate how the human race may be at last destroyed. It would be easy to cut their threads any time with a little sharper blast from the north. We go on dating from Cold Fridays and Great Snows; but a little colder Friday, or greater snow would put a period to man's existence on the globe."

As unstable, dangerous and cruel that Nature's justice can be, Mother Nature simultaneously regenerate the soul, and both Emerson and Thoreau believed that emotional and spiritual rebirth was an important tool of Nature's glory. In his journal, Emerson writes (in absolutely beautiful prose of Whitman): "In the instant you leave far behind all human relations, wife, mother and child, and live only with the savages -water, air, light, carbon, lime, and granite. Nature grows over me. Frogs pipe; waters far off tinkle; dry leaves hiss; grass bends and rustles, and I have died out of the human world and come to feel a strange, cold, aqueous, terraqueous, aerial, ethereal sympathy and existence. I sow the sun and moon for seeds." Similarly in "Walking", Thoreau writes, "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." Dying in nature is automatic rebirth, a recycling. "Walking": "So we saunter toward the Holy Land, till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts. And light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm and serene and golden as on a bank side in autumn."

Emerson goes on in "Circles": "There is no end in nature, but every ending is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens. This fact, as far as it symbolizes the moral fact of the Unattainable, the flying Perfect, around which the hands of man can never meet.." To Emerson, the fluidness of his surroundings meant Nature is a continuous

expression of the spirit. Thoreau continues the same idea in "The Pond in Winter": "After a still winter night I awoke with the impression that some question had been put to me, which I had been endeavouring in vain to answer in my sleep, as what? How? When? where? But there was dawning Nature, in whom all creatures live, looking in at my broad windows with serene and satisfied face, and no question on her lips. I awoke to an answered question to nature and daylight." The answer was there is no answer--just open your eyes to see what Nature reveals to you day after day! He continues this idea of not really wanting to know all of nature's laws: "Our notions of law and harmony are commonly confined to those instances we detect; but the harmony results from a far greater number of seemingly conflicting, but really concurring, laws, which we have not detected, is still more wonderful."

It is noteworthy that naturalism has never been a synonym of Romanticism. Naturalism simply means the employment of detailed and horrified scenes in a literary work as in the work of Emila Zola. Realism depicts everything without idolizing or as it is in reality, whereas, naturalism depicts the grotesque and the truth of reality in a detail manner very clearly.

Conclusively we can say;

Naturalism applies scientific principles of objectivity as described above to its study of human beings whereas; Transcendentalism is the employment of religious ideas in literary works based on the philosophy that emphasizes the spiritual and intuitive.

Henry David Thoreau also promoted American Transcendentalist ideals accenting the importance of the individual liberty, self-reliance, natural rights, etc. At the same time, he complements his transcendentalist views with some naturalist ideas, especially those that refer to the struggle of people against the violation of their rights and overwhelming power of the state. For instance, he invokes to take active social actions against any limitations or violation of human rights and liberties within.

It is the way that Thoreau attempts to achieve American Transcendentalist ideals of happy and harmonious life of people by applying of materialistic, naturalist methods of struggle for fundamental and spiritual ideals of American Transcendentalism. At the same time, transcendentalist ideals were not always dominant and in Cormac McCarthy's "All the Pretty Horses" literary naturalism apparently overtakes American Transcendentalism. McCarthy, in his "All the Pretty Horses" shows how transcendentalist idealism of the main character is ruined when he interacts the real world, where naturalist laws rule. In such a way, the author attempts to show the inconsistency of American Transcendentalist idealism in relation to the highly materialistic real world mirrored by literary naturalism.

Thus, taking into account all that is mentioned above, it is possible to conclude that the development of American Transcendentalism and literary naturalism was accompanied by a considerable tension because the former could not conciliate with the idealism of the appease. However, the ultimate goals of both philosophical movements basically concurred since they targeted at the achievement of balance in human life and relationships.

**Conclusion**

After assessing transcendentalism from its growth to its adolescence and having a look at its oriental and naturalistic background, we come to the conclusion that this movement was laden by the feeling of humanity and for the change aiming at the achievement of an ideal through peaceful manner with all the reverence to man and society. It is interesting to mention that none of the scholars belonging to the early era of this movement could remain without being influenced by it and the ideology continued to prevail over the phenomenon of literature and religion considerably.

It can simply be defined as the delicate movement based on delicate principals, working through delicate means and aiming at achieving delicate goals.

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