Experience

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Ralph Waldo Emerson was one of the most influential American writers and philosophers of the 19th century. His father, a descendant of the Puritans, was a Unitarian pastor, and his mother was a devout Anglican. It was perhaps inevitable, then, that Emerson gravitated toward divinity: after graduating from Harvard College in 1821, and studying at Harvard Divinity School, he was ordained as a Unitarian minister at Boston's Second Church in 1829. His young wife's early death from tuberculosis in 1831 drove him to question his Christian faith and eventually to leave the ministry in 1832. He traveled to Europe, meeting many of the leading thinkers and artists of the era, including Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Thomas Carlyle. In 1834, Emerson took up permanent residence in Concord, Massachusetts, which would be his home for the rest of his life. Soon after, in 1836, he published *Nature*, his philosophical manifesto and a core text for the movement that would form around him, called Transcendentalism, which emphasized the mysterious presence of the divine in nature. In 1840, he helped Margaret Fuller and others found *The Dial*, a Transcendentalist journal, and in 1841 and 1844, respectively, he collected and published two volumes, or "series," of his *Essays*; "Experience" was published in the second series. Throughout the following decades, Emerson enjoyed widespread literary fame and traveled across the country delivering lectures. By the time of his death, in 1883, he was known as the Sage of Concord, canonized—perhaps somewhat ironically, for someone who began as a radical—among the greats personalities of American culture.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Born in 1803, Emerson was raised and educated in the optimistic and rationalist intellectual tradition of the previous century's Enlightenment. Enlightenment philosophers and scientists held that one can best grasp the truths of nature through reason, and prized rigorous scientific method. They were skeptical of religion's role in philosophy and politics. It was against this tradition that Emerson rebelled, championing a spiritual and mystical approach to the world that grounded all truth in the individual's intuitive experience. These beliefs are clearly expressed in Emerson's repeated claims in "Experience" that life is composed only of subjective experience. This philosophy came to be known as Transcendentalism, a name derived from the work of the German thinker Immanuel Kant. Emerson was a member of the Unitarian Church, an American sect of Christianity that emphasizes the oneness of God (as opposed to his division into the Trinity) and the omnipresence of divinity in nature. However, Eastern religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism—at least as they were understood in 19th-century America—were also important in the development of Emerson's worldview. Emerson's expansive philosophy coincided first with the massive expansion of the American project into the Western wilderness and then with the tumult of the American Civil War.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Experience," which was published in the second series of Emerson's *Essays*, treats many of the themes explored in other essays. Its discussion of individuality draws on ideas developed "Self-Reliance," its philosophy of nature on the book *Nature* and "The Over Soul." Emerson's primary precursors as an essayist were Michel de Montaigne, who coined the word "essay" and pioneered the open-ended style of philosophical writing Emerson practices in his *Essays* (final edition published in 1595), as well as Francis Bacon, known as the codifier of the scientific method, but also the author of *Essays* (1597) in the style of Montaigne. Montaigne even wrote an essay called "Experience," in which he discusses many of the same topics that Emerson considers in his essay of the same name. Emerson read widely in the classics; he learned from the form and content of Seneca's *Moral Letters* (first century CE), as well as Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* and *Moralia* (second century CE). Emerson also deeply admired Shakespeare and Milton, both of whom are mentioned in "Experience." As leader of the Transcendentalist movement, Emerson most notably inspired Henry David Thoreau to write not only his famous book *Walden* (1854), but also his enormous journal. Emerson's ideas about the individual and the natural world helped inspire Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) and Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855). The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche drew inspiration from Emerson's ideas about the primacy of spirit and intuition over reason, as well as the potential of exceptional individuals to transcend the strictures of received morality.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "Experience"
- **When Written:** 1841-1844
- **Where Written:** Concord, Massachusetts
- **When Published:** 1844
- **Literary Period:** American Transcendentalism, American Romanticism, American Renaissance
- **Genre:** Essay

EXTRA CREDIT

Emerson, Messenger Boy. Emerson was a precocious child and was admitted to Harvard College at the tender age of 14 He was appointed "freshman messenger" for the president of the college, and as such was used to send messages to members of the faculty and to find students who were cutting class.

Napoleon's Nephew. After graduating college, Emerson moved to St. Augustine, Florida, taking the advice of doctors who had told him that the warm weather would be good for his health. He took long, contemplative walks on the beach, wrote poetry, and, oddly enough, encountered Prince Achille Murat, the nephew of Napoleon Buonaparte. The two became fast friends, and Emerson counted Murat as an important influence.

PLOT SUMMARY

Emerson's "Experience" is a philosophical essay about the way human beings experience the world. The essay first concentrates on the subjective, individual, and essentially lonely nature of experience: a person, Emerson claims, can never actually make contact with reality, and remains always isolated within the scope of his or her own mind. Then, Emerson changes his tone and offers ways to overcome, or to begin overcoming, the gap between individual and reality.

The essay begins with a long poetic epigraph. The poem's speaker describes the "lords of life," the forces that determine the nature of individual experience. These are "Use," or habit, which occupies most of one's time and determines most of one's activity in the world. Habit is interrupted by "Surprise," since human beings have only limited knowledge of the workings of reality, and hence are never able to make accurate predictions about what will occur. Indeed, what people engage with is really just "Surface," the appearances of things, which means that human experience has the character of a "Dream," a "Succession swift" of appearances and moods. Emerson compares this succession of feelings to a **string of beads**, each of which acts as a lens through which humans see the world. Since reality is only ever an appearance, all harm and misfortune that people experience is only "Spectral Wrong," because it does not actually affect the human spirit. The primary example of this that Emerson discusses is the death of his young son, Waldo. Although experience seems to be objective—to be of the world as it is—it is instead always shaped by a person's inborn "Temperament," his or her natural predisposition to see and feel certain things. The final "lord of life," the force that governs the others, is "the inventor of the game," a divine creative force.

Emerson describes humans as essentially unable to make contact with the world or with each other. The divine creative energy of nature is out of their reach. Human life seems trivial and, in a way, it is. Emerson urges the reader to moderate his or her desires, and to temper his or her experience of misfortune with the awareness that, because the human subject is essentially isolated from the world, misfortune is nothing more than an "inconvenience."

Despite the essential gulf between the subject and reality—what Emerson describes as "an innavigable sea" that "washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at"—Emerson's essay takes a hopeful turn and explores the ways in which someone might begin to bridge this gap and make contact with things as they really are. Emerson encourages the reader to follow his lead and not to "craze yourself with thinking" and "husband" each and every moment of life. Instead of spending one's time and energy thinking about the past or the future, and trying to make one's life add up to some whole greater than the sum of its parts, Emerson enjoins the reader to "fill the hour" and to "find the journey's end in every step of the road." By anchoring oneself in experience, rather than thinking critically about it, one can perhaps begin to reintegrate the thinking subject into the objective world of reality by essentially forgetting that the two were divided in the first place. The essay's movement from the morose and analytical to the poetic and optimistic enacts this change of perspective, and Emerson concludes what was initially an essay about the smallness of human life with a hopeful call to transcendence.

CHARACTERS

Ralph Waldo Emerson – Emerson is the author of "Experience" as well as its narrator, since the essay is written in the first person. By the time he wrote "Experience," Emerson was a well-known and well-respected intellectual and philosopher, and the de facto leader of the fledgling movement of Transcendentalism. Like Michel de Montaigne, one of his major literary and philosophical precursors, Emerson argues in "Experience" that all experience of the world and of other people is subjective. The essay form—which, unlike, say, a philosophical treatise, is always grounded in first-person experience—is the literary embodiment of this worldview. Emerson's use of his own personal life experience to make his broader philosophical point is not only appropriate, but, according to his argument, necessary, for it would be impossible for Emerson to know anything beyond the sphere of his own subjective reality. Yet Emerson does claim to describe the "transcendental" features that characterize human experience generally. Above all, Emerson claims that no human ever makes true contact with reality and instead only skates on the surface, seeing reality from his or her own perspective and not as it is in itself. Individuals are ultimately alone in the world, trapped within their own versions of reality and only granted intermittent contact with things as they really are through the

grace of the divine, which for Emerson seems to be a vaguely Christian, vaguely Hindu, vaguely pagan creative force in nature. This idea helps Emerson overcome his grief for his son Waldo, who passed away while Emerson was writing "Experience"; like an ancient Stoic, Emerson reasons that the loss did not really affect him.

Waldo Emerson – Waldo Emerson was Ralph Waldo Emerson's son. He died at the age of five in 1842, lost to scarlet fever. In a long poem written to his memory, "Threnody," Emerson called Waldo "the hyacinthine boy" who "did adorn / the world whereinto he was born." Emerson discusses the boy's death in a short but rich passage of "Experience," in which he shows that the implications of his theory of individual experience is that calamities like the loss of a child cannot really affect someone. Losing a child is not much different than losing a piece of property, Emerson claims. With this, Emerson echoes the ancient Stoics, suggesting that the tragedy is an inconvenience but does not affect the state of one's soul. Waldo haunts "Experience" in other places, too, particularly when Emerson denounces the capacity of doctors and scientists to understand human nature and also when Emerson considers the phenomenon of people who die young and do not fulfill their full potential.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE INDIVIDUAL AND SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE

Emerson's essay "Experience" is concerned with the individual subject—the thinking, feeling person who has experience. For experience of any kind does not exist without an individual subject to *have* that experience. (If there weren't a subject, who would be doing the experiencing?) Emerson believes that, instead of experiencing reality directly, individuals experience reality *as it seems to them*. Therefore, experience is something that happens on the level of the individual and is not shared. However, Emerson ultimately suggests that even if humans do not share experiences themselves, they share a structure of experience—namely, one that is bound by the limitations of the human subject in space and time.

Emerson suggests that the individual is limited and unable to perceive the totality of existence. "We find ourselves," Emerson writes, "in a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none." The smallness of our actions in comparison to the apparent boundlessness of experience makes it difficult for us to "know to-day whether we are busy or idle." It is almost impossible in daily life to understand how a person's discrete actions, choices, and experiences sum up to a human life. The limitations of our experience become the limitations of the world. "Souls never touch their objects," and instead of experiencing objects—things or people—one just experiences a version of them, what might be called a *phenomenon* that is filtered through one's particular individual self, or, to use Emerson's word, soul. The individual should therefore be conceived not as some stable set of characteristics but rather as a unit of stability in a flowing stream of experience. The individual experiences "a train of moods like a **string of beads**," each of which is a "lens" onto reality.

Every soul, Emerson explains, has an individual "temperament" or disposition toward reality. No matter how hard one tries, this inborn attitude determines how one will behave and how one will experience life. If moods are like beads, experienced in succession, "Temperament is the iron wire on which the beads are strung." It is the perspective from which we experience reality. People perceive of themselves to be autonomous and to have experience of the world and of themselves that is more or less objective. But Emerson points out that the human temperament is " a prison of glass which we cannot see," which determines the overall contours of our experience and our actions. This holds true for other individuals, who seem to be in control of their lives but in reality are "creatures of given temperament, which will appear in a given character, whose boundaries they will never pass." This "individual texture" cannot be corrected or changed, no matter how hard one works.

Although individuals long for static truths and experiences, and seek to describe them through art and philosophy, Emerson asserts that the only thing that remains constant is temperament. Reality, filtered through humans' ever-changing bodies and minds, never stays constant. One basic proof for the inconstancy of human experience is the way people's opinions change. We as humans have a "love of the real" compels us to seek out examples of permanent truths, like great works of art of literature. But then preferences change and we may suddenly prefer to read something else. Just as the human body, when healthy, is constantly changing, so is the mind. "Health of body consists in circulation," Emerson writes, "and sanity of mind in variety or facility of associations." Although we may have some inherent longing for the permanent, our mind needs change in order to be healthy. Therefore, we "live amid surfaces," rather than profound truths; our "office is with moments," rather than with eternity.

Although we try to capture something of eternity through our vain efforts to develop predictive science and our fervent religious faith (which Emerson contemptuously refers to as

"our idolatries"), our experience simply doesn't allow us to get to the heart of nature. Ultimately, since "nature does not like to be observed, and likes that we should be her fools and playmates," a human intelligence cannot perceive what is permanent and orderly about experience. It is only from the perspective of "divinity" that there is any stability in human society. When viewing human behavior from the farthest possible remove, one can see that "divinity is behind our failures and follies." Some divine plan structures what seems to be the fickleness and unreliability of human behavior.

Experience, in Emerson's essay, is something that happens *in* and *for* an individual subject. Because that individual subject is constantly in flux, experience is also in flux, and stable reality—in the form of religious or scientific truth, or even knowledge of other human beings—is not accessible to human beings. In order to perceive the unity in a human life, and in human society more broadly, one must consider reality from the perspective of a divinity, where all change reveals itself to be part of a broader unifying order. That unity, however, is beyond the scope of human experience.

STOICISM, SKEPTICISM, AND HOPE

One of the primary themes of Emerson's "Experience" is limitation. Emerson's theory of the individual and his or her subjective experience of the world limits the sphere of human knowledge and agency. Although Emerson himself does not employ the term *stoicism*—which refers to an ancient philosophical school that sought calm and well-being by withdrawing from the world into the self—the worldview he develops in "Experience" is based on the fundamental idea expounded by the ancient Stoics: one should recognize and appreciate what is under one's control and what is outside of it. Emerson therefore urges his readers to be skeptical of any efforts to predict the future through science and emphasizes the impossibility of ever truly knowing another human being. Yet, despite Emerson's emphasis in the first half of "Experience" on a lonely skepticism, in the second half of the essay he hopefully suggests strategies for overcoming the limitations of the subject and bridging the gap that separates individuals from the world.

At the beginning of "Experience," Emerson argues that individuals are detached from reality. People spend much of their time in anticipation of the future or reminiscence about the past. They have some sense that the most real experience is anywhere else but the present. Some of them will "court suffering" in order to find "the sharp peaks and edges of truth." But Emerson insists that suffering is just as shallow as any other kind of experience of the world, for our "souls never touch their objects." With the premature death of Waldo, his son, Emerson "seem[s] to have lost a beautiful estate,—no more." His son was like any other kind of possession: essentially separate from Emerson himself. Misfortune, then, ultimately leaves Emerson "as it found [him],—neither better nor worse." Just as souls never really make contact with the objects they experience, misfortune does not "touch" Emerson.

Because humans can never escape the bubble of their own experience, both nature and other people are fundamentally unknowable. Nature "does not like to be observed," and instead of making humans privy to her workings, prefers us to "be her fools and playmates." As a result, humans do not have the power to make firm contact with reality or with other people. Therefore "our relations to each other are oblique and casual." One consequence of this is that "there is an optical illusion about every person we meet," since, though we perceive them to be autonomous, in reality their experience and behavior is largely determined by their internal "temperament," which is invisible to us when we encounter them. Another consequence is that efforts to predict the behavior of others, or of nature, through scientific laws, are ultimately in vain. Physicians who claim that they can predict a human character through the shape of the skull (phrenology) are in fact guilty of "impudent knowingness," since each person is ultimately full of "inscrutable possibilities" that can never be known through science. The human being is too complicated to be theorized. "I accept the clangor and jangle of contrary tendencies," Emerson writes. In general, "Life is a series of surprises" that cannot be predicted. "Nature hates calculators," and the best way of life is the one that is more or less instinctual, the one that embraces chance. For "the individual is always mistaken" about what will happen in the future.

As a strategy to lessen the divide between individual and reality, Emerson encourages his reader to move away from reason and to immerse him- or herself in experience. Emerson urges his reader to stop searching for extreme ways of life or rare works of art, and instead to embrace what is right in front of them. People should not strive to be overly rational or overly sensual, since "the middle region of our being is the temperate zone." This is the "equator of life, of thought, of spirit, of poetry"—the narrow part of the human being through which these higher things become accessible. Instead of contemplating the inevitability of death (and the impossibility of bringing the dead back to life), as Emerson did in the first half of "Experience," one should not "craze [oneself] with thinking" and instead "husband the moment." One should accept the transience of human life, since "everything good is on the highway," even in the realm of art. Emerson will not strive to see rare works of art or find rare books, but prefers to look at great and timeless works that are hung in the great public museums and to read "the commonest books," such as the Bible, and literary works by Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare. He will immerse himself in the ordinary, the normal, and the classic. Emerson hopes that, through relishing daily life, and appreciating the art that is easily accessible, his reader will learn once again how to simply live.

Emerson's theory of the individual has important implications for the worldview he describes in "Experience." The moral implication of this theory is a kind of stoicism. Because the individual only ever experiences the world and never makes direct contact with it, the individual is capable of a kind of stoic remove from his or her own life. For whenever one experiences misfortune, it is really an experience like any other—something that happens in the external world and which therefore does not directly affect the subject. The consequence of Emerson's theory of the individual is a general skepticism. The fundamental separation from reality makes it impossible for us ever fully to understand how nature, or how our fellow human beings, behave. Efforts to predict the future are futile, and the best way to live life is to accept the fact that events are unpredictable. Ultimately, Emerson suggests that the best approach to life is to embrace the fact that human beings are always in between reason and sensual experience, and to inhabit the middle ground in all spheres of activity. The best way to live is simply to live, not to think about living.

CREATIVITY AND GENIUS

Emerson begins "Experience" by lamenting the fact that human begins are not capable of "new creation." People have the ingenuity to live but not to participate in the divine act of creation. Much of one's life is preoccupied with the details of living, and so the average person rarely has time in which to be creative. The result is that the history of literature and art is dominated by "very few spontaneous actions," the same ideas recurring over and over again in different guises. Yet human beings are not entirely without creative powers, and in "Experience" Emerson describes each individual's capacity, simply through living, to embody the creative force of divinity (described at times in Christian terms as God, at others, in classical terms, such as the First Cause). Emerson suggests that in being an individual, idiosyncratic, and unpredictable person, each individual brings something new to the world.

According to Emerson, humans spend most of their time and energy in the day-to-day activity of living. They move through life largely unconnected to the realm of creativity and genius. It is as if humans are partially asleep, or move through reality like ghosts, not entirely in touch with reality or their full powers. Their faculties are almost entirely absorbed in the tasks of living, and do not have "an ounce to impart or to invest" in the world. Most days are "unprofitable," and it is difficult to understand when creativity happens. In retrospect, "our life looks trivial." Most of life is so occupied with preparation, routine, and recollection that "the pith of each mans genius contracts itself to very few hours." Even a poet spends relatively little time actually creating. Emerson's metaphor of life as a "train of moods like a **string of beads**" also reflects his insistence that people experience life as a series of discrete moments rather than one long arc. It is therefore difficult to execute large projects or to think about questions more elevated than those presented by one's immediate experience.

Although much of human behavior and experience is predetermined by "temperament," Emerson argues that each individual has the capacity to manifest the creative energy of the divine in his or her actions. Most of the time, a person's inherent predispositions determines his or her behavior. The "individual texture holds its dominion" and cannot be overcome through intentional action. This does not necessarily determine our thoughts and feelings but does "fix the measure of activity and of enjoyment." There is therefore always some limitation on our experience that we cannot really perceive. Yet every "intelligence" still has some connection with the "creative power" of the world. Emerson uses the metaphor of "a door which is never closed, through which the creator passes." Although for the most part humans do not have connection with reality per se, and are kept by nature as "fool and plaything" rather than agent or representative, there are moments in which the creative force in nature manifests through individuals. One way in which this creative energy is made manifest in individuals is simply through their existence. Each individual was impossible, unthinkable, unimaginable before he or she came into the world. Even though people may manifest divine creativity, that faculty is not necessarily independent or autonomous. Writing, which appears to be an act of independent creation, is the result of some divine force. "There is nothing of us in our works," Emerson writes. "All writing comes by the grace of God, and all doing and having." Writing, like all of human behavior, is just one in the "series of surprises" that make up life.

Because creativity is the manifestation of the divine in the individual, and not really an autonomous action, there is no fundamental difference between the genius of great artists, leaders, or scientists, and that of normal people. Experience is made up of a "subject and an object" and the interaction between the two. "What imports it," asks Emerson, "where it is Kepler and the sphere; Columbus and America; a reader and his book; or puss and her tail?" Great historical individuals should be thought of as "geologists" of the soul, showing the rest of the world what the soul contains and what it looks like. The "partial action of each strong mind"—that is, the extent to which these individuals achieve some sort of greatness through action in the world—illuminates one part of the soul. If similar action were simultaneously achieved in all other areas, the soul would attain "her due sphericity," and would be fully expanded. The human being who could do in every domain what Napoleon did in the domain of politics would achieve "the transformation of genius into practical power," as Emerson puts it in the closing line of his essay. This individual would attain a transcendent autonomy approaching the divine.

Just as human knowledge is circumscribed by the nature of the

individual subject, so is human creativity. In "Experience," Emerson laments the way in which humans seem to be incapable of getting past the small trials of daily experience to achieve creative autonomy. (It is perhaps not a coincidence that, following the death of his son, Waldo, Emerson calls into question the ability of an individual to bring something new into the world.) Humans *do* create—Emerson, for one, writes, as did Homer and Shakespeare and Milton—but Emerson suggests that even that creative faculty is actually a manifestation of the divine creative energy at the heart of nature. Emerson concludes "Experience"—a generally mournful essay, that insists over and over again on the limitations of human beings—by fantasizing about the transcendence of the human condition to achieve a "practical power" that no human has ever achieved.

SOCIAL LIFE AND INDIVIDUALISM

According to Emerson, all individuals are isolated from reality and from each other, unable to plumb the depths of nature or ever fully to grasp the "temperament" that rules the life of other individuals. Emerson therefore advocates a kind of individualism, since according to his theory of experience, every person is essentially alone in his or her own mind. True social interaction is barely possible, and when it does occur, it is unsustainable. When people form communities governed by norms of action, they generally do not treat the other members as they treat themselves. Emerson suggests that this is at least partially because, while one is able to experience the complex motivations, both rational and emotional, that underlie one's own behavior, it is difficult to extend this sensitivity to others.

Just as the individual subject is fundamentally separate from nature, and only experiences the "surfaces" of things, so is he or she fundamentally separate from other individuals. We experience other people as an "optical illusion": they seem to be autonomous but are in fact "creatures of a given temperament," whose behavior is governed by laws that are not possible for anyone besides God to understand. Humans, therefore, are fundamentally unpredictable. From Emerson's perspective, those who claim that they can predict human behavior, such as phrenologists (who claim to be able to judge a person based on the shape of their skull), are guilty of the worst kind of conceit. The inability to really know others has implications beyond our day to day social life. It affects our politics and even our religion. People forget that "it is the eye which makes the horizon," Emerson writes, "and the round mind's eye which makes this or that man a type of representative humanity with the name of a hero or a saint." Judgments about the virtues of others are fundamentally subjective.

True human connection is therefore extremely difficult, and most of the time impossible. It's not just that any human relationship must rely on presuppositions about the other. It is also that both parties of any relationship are constantly in flux. "The great and crescive self," manifesting (albeit not autonomously) the creative power of nature, "supplants all relative existence, and ruins the kingdom of mortal friendship and love." People cannot entirely control the way they interact with others. Emerson even questions the possibility of spiritual marriage, a radical assertion in the largely Christian society of 19th-century America. Echoing Hegel's master-slave dialectic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Emerson claims that spiritual marriage is impossible because of the "inequality between every subject and every object": no individual is ever really able to perceive another person as a proper subject. The other is always an object. There will always be a divide between the first and the second person, "the same gulf between every me and thee, as between the original and the picture." At best, two human beings can connect at a single point, like the tangent point of two circles. While they connect along this single point, the other parts of the individuals are "inert" and, in a slightly confusing image, storing up "appetency" for their own connections. Every union, then, produces as much discord as it produces connection.

Emerson goes so far as to claim that life does not permit any "co-life": that there is only really one soul. This, at least, is the fiction each self operates under, for "we believe in ourselves, as we do not believe in others." This is why people treat themselves so differently than they treat others. One judges another much more severely than oneself. Every act looks different to the individual when he or she is the person committing it. It is finally impossible to imagine one's way into another person's mind. Crime (or sin) is a category that exists outside subjective experience. It is a label attached by the intellect. It has an "objective existence, but not subjective." In the end, then, people have a "constitutional necessity of seeing things under private aspects, or saturated with our humors." It is impossible to escape the individual subject and see people or things they way they really are. Productive co-existence, however, is not totally impossible. In order to do so, one must first have a firm grasp of the dynamics of one's own self. The philosopher should seek to attain "self-trust": the ability to understand what wisdom (religious, philosophical, etc.) actually applies to one's own condition, and how it does so. Only once a philosopher has achieved this "self-trust" can he or she help others to do the same.

In "Experience," Emerson argues that individuals are essentially separate from one another, and that subjects experience the world by themselves. This is a philosophy of individualism that, although less upbeat than the one Emerson famously articulates in "Self-Reliance," is no less radical and far-reaching. In addition, because of their fleeting nature, humans can never achieve firm and lasting relationships, which makes social life difficult. But with the kind of philosophical introspection Emerson practices in his essays, productive co-existence is possible.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE STRING OF BEADS

In "Experience," Emerson compares the individual's experience of life to a "string of beads," which he says act like "many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue." Instead of reality being something stable—like, for example, the space-time of physics—human beings can only ever experience reality through the filter of their own subjective viewpoint. Experience is therefore filtered through a person's individual, subjective moods. These moods change according to the natural human tendency to change: the individual's experience of life changes as he or she goes through life, moving from one mood to another as if going from bead to bead on the string. Motion and variation is therefore an important connotation of the "string of beads." But just as it implies change, so does it imply some basic stability and organization in the form of the string. Emerson suggests that the "iron wire" on which the beads are strung is *temperament*, a slightly mysterious but fundamentally important disposition or attitude that each person receives at birth. (Renaissance writers, like Montaigne, referred to temperament as *complexion*.) The image of the "string of beads," and particularly the "iron wire," recalls Emerson's famous metaphor of the "iron string" in his essay on "Self-Reliance," which is a figure for the individual character at the core of each individual.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Publications edition of *Self-Reliance and Other Essays* published in 1993.

Experience Quotes

The lords of life, the lords of life,—
I saw them pass,
In their own guise,
Like and unlike,
Portly and grim,
Use and Surprise,
Surface and Dream,
Succession swift, and spectral Wrong,
Temperament without a tongue,
And the inventor of the game
Omnipresent without name;—
Some to see, some to be guessed,
They marched from east to west:
Little man, least of all,
Among the legs of his guardians tall,
Walked about with puzzled look:—
Him by the hand dear nature took;
Dearest nature, strong and kind,
Whispered, "Darling, never mind!
To-morrow they will wear another face,
The founder thou! these are thy race!"

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), Waldo Emerson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

Emerson's "Experience" begins with this long poetic epigraph. The poem summarizes the essay to come, particularly the first section, which dwells on the nature of human experience. (The second section of the essay, while continuing to explore the same theme, also offers preacherly advice on how to make the most of that experience.) The poem describes the forces, or "lords," that control human life. These are "Use," or habit, which dictates much of human behavior, and "Surprise," the unpredictable encounters that Emerson believes determines the character of most experience and makes prediction impossible. Because reality for people is only ever a "Surface and Dream," humans only ever live in their own experience, and cannot make contact with reality itself. Instead, they experience the "Succession swift" of their moods, which can include "spectral Wrong," or the appearance of harm or misfortune—such as the death of Emerson's son, Waldo, or the loss of property. This misfortune is ultimately "spectral" because, according to the Stoic philosophy from which Emerson draws inspiration, it

only happens in the realm of experiences, and cannot really touch the "soul." More important than what actually happens is one's "Temperament," the attitude each person has to life, which ultimately dictates the kind of things one will do and feel and the kind of experience to which one will be receptive. The final "lord of life" is God, or the divine energy of Nature that Emerson describes in "Experience" and elsewhere.

Emerson understands that these "lords" govern his life, but does not make contact with them. He is merely a "little man," who is moved through life by the hand of nature, not by his own will. The appearances of the "lords" change just as everything in human experiences changes. In "Experience," Emerson will describe this theory of experience in more detail, and then think through the consequences of the fact that reality is always out of reach.

> There are moods in which we court suffering, in the hope that there, at least, we shall find reality, sharp peaks and edges of truth. But it turns out to be scene-painting and counterfeit. The only thing grief has taught me, is how shallow it is. [...] Souls never touch their objects. An innavigable sea washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at and converse with. Grief too will make us idealists. In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate,—no more. I cannot get it nearer to me. [...] It does not touch me: some thing which I fancied was a part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me, nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me, and leaves no scar. It was caducous. I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature. [...] Nothing is left us now but death.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), Waldo Emerson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

Emerson begins "Experience" by noting that many people have an intuitive sense that they are not in contact with reality. They search for the "sharp peaks and edges of truth" in extreme experiences, like grief. But Emerson, who has recently experienced extreme grief with the death of his son, Waldo, argues that grief actually reveals the precise opposite: that real life is entirely out of reach. This is because the subject, or the individual, is always fundamentally separate from the object, or what they experience. Emerson writes that the gap is like an "innavigable sea," an expanse whose vastness prevents individuals from ever reaching the people and objects they "aim at and converse with." Grief, instead of bringing Emerson closer to the one he mourned, solidified his belief that humans cannot make contact with things and people, only their appearances.

Although Emerson laments this separation, it has its upsides: namely, it permits Emerson to achieve a kind of Stoic removal from reality. He has learned through grief that the person he thought was most important to his existence, whom he "fancied was a part of" him, was as much an object in his world as anything else. This newfound sense of total independence from the world means that the only external event that will actually have an impact on Emerson is death.

> Nature does not like to be observed, and likes that we should be her fools and playmates. We may have the sphere for our cricket-ball, but not a berry for our philosophy. Direct strokes she never gave us power to make; all our blows glance, all our hits are accidents. Our relations to each other are oblique and casual.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

This statement on the fundamental separation of the individual subject from his or her surroundings comes after Emerson's discussion of grief. He has just articulated a Stoic philosophy of detachment from misfortunes that occur. This stoicism is premised on the idea that misfortune, however grave, does not have to affect the person to whom it occurs. The way someone feels about a tragedy is a question of attitude, because the individual is not "touched" by the misfortune unless it results in his or her own death.

Emerson's claim about nature, then, expands on his idea that each subject is fundamentally separate from what is outside of it. The self can never truly know everything that is the self, from the workings of nature to the thoughts or feelings of another person. Unlike scientist, who may believe that nature can be understood through close observation, Emerson holds that the workings of nature are

hidden to humanity. Nature cannot be controlled or known, and instead of treating humans as equals, regards people, cruelly, as "fools" and "playmates." Using the metaphor of the game cricket, Emerson writes that people are not permitted to have "direct strokes" that make contact with reality. The metaphorical ball of "philosophy," or solid knowledge of things outside of the self, is smaller than a berry, too small to hit. As a result, when people do make contact with objects or people outside of them, it is "oblique and casual," not intentional. Later in the essay, Emerson will encourage his readers to be open to these kinds of experiences—to abandon any effort to predict the future and simply accept what comes.

> Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and, as we pass through them, they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus....We animate what we can, and we see only what we animate. Nature and books belong to the eyes that see them.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage from the first half of the essay, Emerson argues that humans experience a subjective version of reality, not objective reality itself. He has just discussed the fact that humans are fundamentally separate from nature and other people. Now he describes the way in which experience is subjective, a product of the person who is experiencing it rather than the object that is experienced by the person. Instead of having constant and stable experience of a constant and stable reality, humans experience a "train of moods," a succession of feelings (not thoughts). Emerson compares this to a "string of beads," his central metaphor for the human experience of reality. The image—which recalls the "iron string" of the essay "Self-Reliance"—unites the appearance of stability (within each mood, or bead) with the idea of temporality (a string of such beads). Each passing mood determines the way reality appears, filtering the subject's experience of the world like "many-colored lenses." Moreover, each lens has a particular focal point: a work of art, a natural feature, or another person that occupies the subject's attention until the mood shifts.

In a claim reminiscent of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Emerson argues that the world is effectively created by each subject through experience. The subject "animate[s]" the world, bringing it to life in the act of perception. What people do not "animate" through perceiving does not exist for them. Therefore, nature and art are ultimately the subjective constructions of the viewer or reader, rather than things with static, objective properties.

> Into every intelligence there is a door which is never closed, through which the creator passes. The intellect, seeker of absolute truth, or the heart, lover of absolute good, intervenes for our succor, and at one whisper of these high powers, we awake from ineffectual struggles with this nightmare. We hurl it into its own hell, and cannot again contract ourselves to so base a state.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes at the end of the first section of "Experience," in which Emerson discussed the way in which each humans are essentially separate from reality, and not really in control of life, but rather nature's "fools and playmates." Here, in a slight shift of tone, Emerson states that, despite an individual's powerlessness, and his or her seeming inability to be creative, the individual can act as a conduit for the divine creative energy of nature. Although a personal cannot independently will to be creative, each mind has a "door which is never closed" through which God may enter. When this happens, the intellect gets an exposure to absolute truth and the heart can feel absolute goodness. This moment allows for a transcendence of the world of appearances, which Emerson here, in perhaps his most negative statement on the nature of human experience, calls a "nightmare." With a nearly divine power, the subject can "hurl" experience "into its own hell," and, even though the moment passes, will never be exactly the same again. So, although there is no real hope for autonomous creation, there is a chance that a human could spontaneously feel the divine power of creation for which Emerson longs in the opening paragraphs of the essay.

Do not craze yourself with thinking, but go about your business anywhere. Life is not intellectual or critical, but sturdy. […] To fill the hour,—that is happiness; to fill the hour, and leave no crevice for a repentance or approval.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89-90

Explanation and Analysis

In the second section of "Experience," Emerson questions the value of the analysis he performed in the first section. That is, he begins to think less about the nature of experience—how to describe it in analytical terms—and more practically about how to live. Instead of dwelling on the fundamental separation of subject from reality, and the unpleasant fact that true knowledge is impossible, Emerson considers how to make the most of life, whatever its limitations may be. Here, he urges the reader not to "craze" him or herself with rational thought, but instead to focus on the "business" of life.

Life is not something to be experienced exclusively through reason, to be known through the "critical" faculty (which Emerson himself has employed in the essay's first half) but instead something "sturdy," something experienced as much with the body as with the mind. The mind is also the part of the self that is capable of living in the future or the past; the body remains resolutely in the present. "Happiness" is the condition of filling the present, living each hour to the fullest, so that the mind has neither time nor energy to evaluate one's choices with "repentance or approval." Later, Emerson will encourage the reader to "husband" the moments, and to treat other people "as if they were real," privileging one's experience of them as autonomous living creatures, even though, according to what Emerson has already written, the other is merely an "optical illusion" and impossible to truly understand. The turn from the rational to the intuitive Emerson makes here is a hallmark of Transcendentalism and can be found throughout Emerson's work.

If we will take the good we find, asking no questions, we shall have heaping measures. The great gifts are not got by analysis. Everything good is on the highway. The middle region of our being is the temperate zone. We may climb into the thin and cold realm of pure geometry and lifeless science, or sink into that sensation. Between these extremes is the equator of life, of thought, of spirit, of poetry,—a narrow belt.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage from the second section of "Experience," Emerson continues to argue for a turn away from thought toward the actual "business" of living. One should not abandon thought entirely, however, but rather pursue a path of moderation between the two. The individual should accept the good aspects of their experience without asking too many questions, and thinking too critically, about the nature of that experience. This is because the "great gifts" of life are not achieved through analysis, but rather destroyed by it: analysis requires breaking things apart in order to understand them, as its etymology reflects (from the Greek verb *analuein*, which means to destroy or dissolve).

Instead of primarily thinking, and trying to reach the "thin and cold realm" of geometry and science—pure reason, and instead "sink[ing]" into the mindless realm of pure feeling, Emerson urges the reader to occupy the "equator of life" between the two. Only when mind and body are in careful equilibrium—within a certain "narrow belt"—is a person able to really live and create.

Power keeps quite another road than the turnpikes of choice and will, namely, the subterranean and invisible tunnels and channels and life. It is ridiculous that we are diplomatists, and doctors, and considerate people: there are no dupes like these. Life is a series of surprises, and would not be worth taking or keeping, if it were not. God delights to isolate us every day, and hide from us the past and the future. […] All good conversation, manners, and action, come from a spontaneity which forgets usages, and makes the moment great Nature hates calculators; her methods are saltatory and impulsive. Man lives by pulses; our organic movements are such; and the chemical and ethereal agents are undulatory and alternate; and the mind goes antagonizing on, and never prospers but by fits. We thrive by casualties.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

In "Experience," Emerson argues that people can never have direct contact with reality. One of the major consequences of the isolation of the individual subject is that true knowledge of nature and natural processes is impossible. This is an explicit rejection of a scientific worldview, and generally of any person who claims to be able to predict the behavior of an individual. Power—the creative force in any individual—does not follow any real paths, or "turnpikes," dictated by human will. Instead, its paths are invisible, buried beneath the surface of life. Therefore, diplomats, physicians, and others who put a lot of store in manners or other codes of behavior are "dupes," since they falsely believe that other people will obey the rules of diplomacy, of phrenology (to use a medical example Emerson has cited previously), or of manners.

Not only it is foolish to try to predict the future, but, Emerson suggests, an overly rational worldview prevents one from being open to the good things in life, which always come by chance. The best human behavior is organic, and comes from some divine instinct rather than from any social rules or customs. This behavior is most natural, and nature is not subordinate to rules developed by humans. Instead, its behavior is "saltatory," jumping from one thing to another. When people live authentically, they live "by pulses," obeying "organic movements" of their soul. As Emerson repeats elsewhere, humans change according to both physical or "chemical" and spiritual or "ethereal" influences. The mind tries to make a person live life intentionally, according to rules, but it only ends up "antagonizing." Instead, all real, genuine behavior—including creative acts like writing—happens ultimately by chance, one of the "lords of life" from the opening epigraph. Humans "thrive" by embracing the organic way of things.

❝ It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made, that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man. Ever afterwards, we suspect our instruments. We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are, or of computing the amount of their errors. Perhaps these subject-lenses have a creative power; perhaps there are no objects. Once we lived what we saw; now, the rapaciousness of this new power, which threatens to absorb all things, engages us. Nature, art, persons, letters, religions,—subjects, successively tumble in, and God is but one of them. Nature and literature are subjective phenomena; every evil and every good thing is a shadow which we cast.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

In the first section of "Experience," Emerson described the essentially tragic separation of the individual from reality. The self will never be able to make real contact with anything outside the self. In the second half of the essay, Emerson thinks about how to cope with this fact, and urges the reader not to think so much about his or her own condition and instead to embrace day-to-day reality. Here Emerson describes the self-aware condition of the philosopher (Emerson's own position) as a kind of fallenness. Emerson repurposes the old story of the Fall from Grace—a Christian reading of the story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, related in the book of Genesis—to describe self-awareness as a kind of philosophical original sin, an existential Fall. Just as Adam and Eve grew aware of their nudity, and became self-conscious, so does the self-aware human become self-conscious of his or her own mind, and "suspect[s]" his or her mind. Instead of being in Edenic unity with the world, the self-conscious person is obsessed with the way reality is warped through the "distorting lenses" that are human moods—precisely the succession of subjective moods that Emerson earlier compared to a "string of beads."

The "discovery we have made, that we exist," and the resultant comprehension of the subjective nature of experience, leads to a kind of destruction of the world. The subject that is self-conscious of the way in which it creates the reality it experiences shows a kind of "rapaciousness" that "absorbs" the worlds, including nature, art, and even God. Everything becomes relative and subjective. Philosophizing, then, makes the individual into an egotist.

Just as Christians believe that life is one long process of recovery from original sin, so does Emerson suggest in "Experience" that the path forward from this Fall is to fight the tendency to over-think the nature of reality and instead to immerse oneself in it.

Life will be imaged, but cannot be divided or doubled. Any invasion of its unity would be chaos. The soul is not twin-born, but the only begotten, and though revealing itself as child in time, child in appearance, is of a fatal and universal power, admitting no co-life. Every day, every act betrays the ill-concealed deity. We believe in ourselves, as we do not believe in others. We permit all things to ourselves, and that which we call sin in others, is experiment for us. It is an instance of our faith in ourselves, that men never speak of crime as lightly as they think: […] The act looks very differently on the inside, and on the outside.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears toward the end of "Experience," where Emerson reiterates the ideas he has previously discussed, and speaks practically not just about the experience of the individual, but about how an individual can co-exist with others. Although Emerson does, in the second section of the essay, urge the reader to immerse him- or herself in life, and to be open to spontaneous encounters with other people, Emerson's individual remains fundamentally isolated from others.

Despite the individual's efforts to embrace the moment and to forget that the experiencing subject creates the world in which they live, those processes are still at work, and it would be difficult—or even dangerous—not to take them into account when interacting with other people. One's impression of another person will always be subjective, Emerson suggests, because it is impossible for a human to really understand that other people exist. A person can "image" (i.e. imagine) life, but it is impossible to fully grasp that another such life could exist elsewhere, and that another person could be at the center of it. Although someone can be conscious of the fact that his or her life is a "child in time" that will inevitably end, and a "child of appearance" that does not necessarily reflect the way things really are, a person cannot really accommodate "co-life." Emerson then cites examples of the way in which humans fail to understand that other people are just as complex and vast as they are, namely the way in which people judge others more harshly than they judge themselves.

Because of the fundamental isolation of each person, one must help oneself before helping others. The philosopher or teacher cannot get inside someone else's head, and so instead must model wisdom, rather than teach it. This is one of the reasons Emerson chooses to write in the form of the essay, in which he mixes philosophical claims with personal reflections, showing thought in motion, rather than telling his reader what to think.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

EXPERIENCE

"Experience" begins with a long epigraph in the form of a poem about the powerlessness of the individual subject in the world. The speaker describes how "lords of life" pass in a "succession swift" in an inevitable movement from east to west, like the sun. The speaker describes the "little man," small and powerless in relation to these gigantic figures as well as the "inventor of the game" (i.e., God), who is "omnipresent" but unnamed. The "little man" stands among the legs of these great figures, unable to understand where exactly nature is taking him. The poem ends with nature whispering words of comfort to the little man, telling him that the giant men are "thy race," and that tomorrow they will appear different, in "another face."

Emerson decides to begin his prose essay with a poem that acts as a kind of summary of what is to come. The use of poetry alongside prose signals to the reader that "Experience" will not be traditional philosophical argument, but instead something that draws upon poetry and personal experience to make its points. Furthermore, the fantastical, slightly surreal tone of the poem matches the dream-like feeling that Emerson, in his first paragraph, claims is a characteristic of human experience.

The essay proper begins with a question: "Where do we find ourselves?" Emerson immediately answers this dramatic query by telling the reader that "we" are in a "series," the exact length of which we do not know. We "wake" into experience, somehow already in the midst of it but unable to understand exactly how we got there. Emerson uses the metaphor of sleep: the "Genius" who, according to an unnamed "old belief," shepherds us into reality, gave us a sleeping potion but made the drink a little too strong. So human beings have a kind of metaphorical "lethargy" about them, with the result that "all things swim and glitter" as in a dream, and the rules and logic governing experience are not clear.

The abruptness of Emerson's opening question mimics the feeling of opening one's eyes out of sleep. The reader is slightly disoriented, beginning the essay seemingly in the middle of a train of thought that is already in progress—precisely like the "series" Emerson describes. The ambiguity between sleeping and wakefulness has an important literary and philosophical resonance, recalling above all Descartes's Meditations, *in which the 16th-century French philosopher asks how he can know whether his is experiencing the real world or a dream-like version created by a malicious demon, and concludes that in the end he cannot know.*

Another feature of the human condition is that people seem to lack "the affirmative principle" by which they can bring "new creation" into the world. People have enough energy to live but not "to impart or to invest" in the world. "Ah that our Genius were a little more of a genius!" Emerson laments. He compares people to millers whose mills are stationed low down on a river, where the current is weak because factories higher up have slowed down the flow. Human beings, in other words, are born already sleepy and exhausted when they come into the world.

Humans seem to have all the faculties necessary for creation, but also lack the energy to actually bring things into the world. Humans have enough "genius" to speak, think, and so on, but not enough to resemble their creator. The idea of being born into an imperfect state hearkens back to the Christian doctrine of original sin, by which, because of Adam and Eve's betrayal of God's covenant in the Garden of Eden, all humans are born sinful and imperfect. Emerson will recall this narrative explicitly toward the end of the essay.

Human beings, Emerson claims, have difficulty understanding the relationship of their daily experience to the sum total of their lives. This is particularly clear in the case of work and productivity. When people think that they are "indolent," they discover that afterward they were, in fact, productive. Every day seems unproductive, and it is unclear when and where we attained "wisdom, poetry, virtue." Emerson suggests, facetiously, that the gods "intercalated" some "heavenly days" in which people achieve such good and noble things. For on the whole, "our life looks trivial," and even martyrs, lovers, and adventurers seem mundane when we encounter them.

One of the reasons humans do not seem capable of creating meaningful things is that they have trouble understanding the relationship between the fleeting present and the sum total of their lives. The mundane seems to leave no room for creativity. The fact that anything has been created seems to be a result of divine inspiration.

The excitement and romance of life seems to come not in actual experience, but instead in expectation and in retelling. Farmers always think that another man has a more fertile field (i.e., the grass is always greener on the other side), and it seems to be "the trick of nature [...] to degrade to-day." Reality is always elsewhere. People spend so much of their time in routine, in anticipation, and in memory, that "each man's genius contracts itself to a very few hours," and even the greatest literature is "a sum of very few ideas, and of very few original tales." In all of human culture, Emerson sees "very few spontaneous actions," very few genuinely creative and independent acts of the will or imagination. Most of behavior is dictated by custom and "gross sense," something like received wisdom or common sense.

Emerson here evokes his general disdain for the emptiness of much of human life, particularly social life. In general, he believes that solitude is necessary to do any real work. When people do try to create, they end up repeating one another. Emerson gives the impression of being outside of this cycle, yet the very form in which he writes betrays any claim to originality: Michel de Montaigne, one of his favorite authors, not only wrote essays in style that Emerson imitates very closely, but also wrote an essay "Of Experience" that is thematically similar to Emerson's writing here.

One result of the restriction of most human life to the banal and the mundane is that people hunger for real experience. Even disaster seems to be softened by a kind of "opium," and the Greek goddess of retribution, the *Ate Dea*, seems to come "with tender feet treading so soft." As a result, people seek real experience, the "sharp peaks and edges of truth," in suffering and grief. Emerson, who lost his son Waldo in 1842, speaks from personal experience when he claims that, instead of bringing him to "reality," grief has only revealed itself to be shallow. Like every other aspect of experience, it "plays about the surface," and does not permit contact with reality. Emerson cites a scientist's theory that physical bodies never truly touch one another, and extends this principle to human souls, which, he claims, "never touch their objects." Even though we may get close, there is in fact an "innavigable sea" between subject and object.

One of the hallmarks of a philosophical essay rather than an argument of a more formal kind is that the author frequently draws on personal experience. Here, Emerson writes about one of the most traumatic things that every happened to him: the death of his son. It is perhaps no wonder that he doubts the powers of human creativity when his own reproductive effort came to such a tragic end. Emerson's theory of individual experience will lead him to be skeptical of science later in the essay—and across his works Emerson argued for a turn away from science and reason to intuitive experience. Here, Emerson draws on a scientific theory about the interaction of physical bodies in order to make his philosophical claim that human souls are inherently independent—they never really make contact with what surrounds them. This scientific anecdote immediately transitions into a spiritual register when Emerson invokes the "sea" that separates individuals, reflecting both the concrete and metaphysical aspects of transcendentalist thought.

The result is that losing a son was, for Emerson, not altogether different than losing a beautiful estate or learning that people who owed him money would not be able to pay back their debt: it would be an "inconvenience" but would not essentially change him. He explains that a "calamity" like losing his son "does not touch [him]." Emerson had thought his son was a part of him, connected to his soul in some direct way, but says that in reality Waldo "falls off from me, and leaves no scar." Even the events that seem most important to one in life are like rain that slides off one's raincoat.

Emerson's comparison of the death of a loved one to the loss of real estate invokes an ancient Stoic discussion about dealing with the loss of loved ones, notably found in a philosophical manual written by the philosopher Epictetus. This classical theme, and the appropriately classical manner in which it is discussed, contrasts with the metaphor of misfortunes skating off the soul like rain of a raincoat—a distinctly modern image. The soul, sheltered beneath the raincoat, is protected but also isolated and separate from life, further emphasizing the importance of fostering individualism.

The only real thing that can happen to a person—that can actually affect one's soul—is death. People might be able to derive a certain satisfaction from contemplating death, because it is the only even which one cannot "dodge." Otherwise, in most of life, people do not really make contact with reality. "Nature does not like to be observed," keeping her workings hidden from humans; instead of her peers, humans are nature's "fools and playmates." All "direct strokes" one makes with reality are accidents. As a result, people can only ever really interact in an "oblique and casual" way.

The only external event that can actually affect the soul is death, and so, perversely, the contemplation of death may become a source of satisfaction for the alienated subject. It may also be considered a relief from the somewhat humiliating position (in Emerson's telling) humans occupy as nature's "fools and playmates."

"Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion" as life moves along through a "train of moods like a **string of beads**." In Emerson's metaphor, these beads—each an individual mood or disposition—act as "many-colored lenses which pain the world their own hue." One's mood, in other words, determines how one experiences reality. The result is that "nature and books belong to the eyes that see them": reality and art are always experienced in a subjective way.

With his metaphor of the "string of beads," Emerson fleshes out his initial statement that life is a "series" of experiences of which we do not know the beginning and the end. Instead of being like a story, with a clear beginning, middle, and end—a teleology—the human experience of life is always shifting, so as to be more like an essay. Emerson's chosen literary form, then, mirrors his theory of experience.

Whether or not one experiences the beauty of a poem or a sunset depends upon one's "structure or temperament," which Emerson compares to the "iron wire" on which the beads of individual moods are strung. One's temperament determines the "actual horizon" of one's experience: whether or not one will actually be receptive to certain kinds of experiences, like beauty or suffering. This is a fundamentally troubling thought, Emerson admits, but it is the reason why some young people who are so gifted seem never to fulfill their potential, either dying young or never distinguishing themselves from the "crowd."

Emerson's comparison of temperament to an iron wire," and earlier the metaphor of the "string of beads," strongly recalls his statement in the essay "Self-Reliance" that "every heart vibrates to that iron string." The result of life being a continuing stream of subjective impressions is that art is ultimately in the eye of the beholder and even religious and scientific truths are subjective.

Since it colors and therefore predetermines all of human experience, temperament is partially responsible for the fact that individual experiences are illusions, and not reality itself. This has implications for social life, namely that every person one encounters presents a kind of "optical illusion." That person appears to be independent and autonomous, but in reality his or her behavior is predetermined by his or her "individual texture," and the same is true for oneself. The "optical illusion," Emerson suggests, affects all parties, not just the observer: even if a person resolves to act morally, for example, or to improve him- or herself, at the end of the day his or her temperament will determine the "measure of activity and of enjoyment" thereof that actually takes place. The power of temperament is one of the reasons that any efforts to predict human behavior through science—such as physics or, more absurdly, phrenology, the prediction of human behavior through the shape of the skull—will ultimately fail. The phrenologists are guilty of the grossest kind of "impudent knowingness" when they claim to understand human behavior.

The general tone of the opening section of "Experience" is defeated, and here there is real appeal to emotion in Emerson's claim that, despite a person's best intentions, some inherent "temperament" will play a large role in determining one's behaviors. Not only will "temperament" frustrate one's volition, but it will also render impossible any effort to predict the behavior of another individual. Emerson's interest in "temperament" was shared by his precursor, Montaigne, who was also fascinated by people's seemingly inborn character. Other Renaissance authors wrote on this topic, too, particularly in connection to the ancient theory of the four humors; in that context, temperament (or "complexion") referred to the ratio of the humors in the body, which would determine someone's character.

But in reality, Emerson suggests, the true value of social interaction lies in the very unpredictability of the person one encounters, the "inscrutable possibilities" that life presents one in the form of another person. Emerson contrasts the presumptuous and ultimately arrogant approach of the physicians with his own openness to the unpredictability of others, which he views as a manifestation of divine creative energy. Every "intelligence" has a "door which is never closed, through which the creator passes." Even though most of human life is absorbed in the mundane, there are moments in which the intellect makes contact with "absolute truth" and the heart makes contact with "absolute good." In these moments, one shakes free of the "ineffectual struggles" of human life calls the "nightmare" that is subjective experience.

Here, Emerson's defeated pessimism yields to a kind of optimism when he admits that it is possible for humans to manifest creativity of a kind. Although it may not be the product of independent will, people can act as a conduit for God's creative energy. In these moments, people can escape the limits of subjective experience, which Emerson, striking the most tragic and dramatic note so far, calls a "nightmare."

Emerson explains that the "secret" of the illusory nature of reality is the fact that the "succession of moods or objects" is necessary for human beings. Humans want to "anchor" themselves in some stable reality, but "the anchorage is quicksand." There are moments in which things seem stable and stationary, but they are in fact moving, just like the stars in the sky. Movement is a necessary part of human experience because human beings themselves are constantly changing. Just as the body requires circulation, so the mind requires "variety." Emerson cites his own experience of reading. He used to think that he would never tire of reading Montaigne. But before reading Montaigne he had had the same thought about Shakespeare, and before that Plutarch, and so on. Similarly, certain paintings capture one's attention for a moment, but then the "emphasis of attention" shifts. Emerson uses the example of the child who asks his mother why the story she told last night was less pleasurable upon the second hearing. The answer to the question is that the child, like every person, was born a "whole," and the story is a "particular": that the story stays the same while the human being changes. Once someone understands this, it becomes clear that human relationships are also fleeting, since people and their affections constantly shift.

The second section of "Experience" is much more hopeful than the first, as Emerson shifts to consider how to make the most of human experience despite its limitations. The first optimistic shift Emerson makes is to embrace the fact that experience is unstable, and, for humans, reality is always changing. This is the way human experience must be, Emerson reasons, and so lamentation will not get him very far. It is interesting to note that Emerson uses his experience of reading (and a child's experience of listening to a bedtime story) to represent his experience of reality in general. Emerson's shifting literary tastes—and the way in which his reading is dictated by his nature, rather than his intellectual ambitions—is mirrored in the casual, shifting nature of the essay form, which also shifts based on the movements of its author's mind rather than according to a fixed plan. Note that Montaigne, referenced in this passage, also insisted that his own reading and writing was guided by whim.

Just as the story was a "particular," rather than a changing human whole, like the child who listened to it, so do other people seem to be "representatives of certain ideas, which they never pass or exceed." One always experiences others as constant, as having a particular and stable nature with particular and stable abilities and talents. Emerson compares them to a piece of rock (Labrador spar), that looks uninteresting until the light hits it a certain way and it shines. Successful people are able to make this talent evident to others often, and therefore do not appear useless to others too much of the time.

Emerson here continues the interesting parallel between individuals and texts: just as a book is constant, so do people seem fixed (even if they are changing internally). As one's taste for a book can change, so can one's opinion of someone's usefulness or talent.

Fortunately, many different kinds of people are necessary in society, so that on the whole people are able to cooperate productively and accomplish what they need to do. Considered as a whole, "divinity" is responsible for both the good and the bad, the useful and the useless, in society and in individuals. The "Power" of divinity hops from person to person the way a bird jumps from branch to branch in a tree. Sometimes divinity manifests in one person, sometimes in another, hence the importance of being open when interacting with others.

Emerson's discussion of the way in which people complement one another's talents in society is at once a practical observation about how communities work and a statement in religious faith: from God's perspective, the diversity of human characters coheres into a meaningful whole, governed by rules that are invisible to the individual subject. This explains Emerson's emphasis throughout "Experience" on chance: what seems like a mere accident or coincident to a humans subject is actually part of some divine order.

In general, Emerson writes, humans can only get so far through intellect and reason. In the end, "life is not dialectics," and reason, critical thinking, and analysis promise more than they can actually deliver. "Culture […] ends in head-ache," because the human capacity to shape reality is limited. So, instead of attempting to plan one's life, "go about your business anywhere," Emerson preaches. "Life is not intellectual or critical, but sturdy," something that is experienced through body as well as mind.

Here, Emerson expresses one of the central tenets of Transcendentalism: intuitive experience is superior to scientific knowledge. Recalling Montaigne's thinking on the inextricable relationship of mind and body, Emerson argues that a human is an embodied creature and human life is "sturdy," tangible and physical—not just intellectual. This is in tension with the insistence earlier in the essay that human experiences are of appearances only, and not reality itself. That tension reflects the fact that Emerson is now taking his own advice to spend less energy on critical philosophy and analyzing the human condition, and more on the practical challenge of living.

Reality itself is indifferent to human efforts, so one should concentrate on the present, on what one is experiencing in the here and now, finding "the journey's end in every step of the road." True wisdom is maximizing the number of "good hours," rather than trying to make one's life into a glorious unity or attempting to ensure salvation in the afterlife. Adopting the tone of a preaching, Emerson tells his readers that since "our office is with moments, let us husband them," treating our time as if it was an end in and of itself, and treating other people as if they were real, because "perhaps they are." People "do broad justice where we are" and treat everyone, regardless of status, with respect, accepting our "actual companions and circumstances" rather than wishing for better things.

Emerson is now giving advice about how to live, rather than simply describing how the world seems to him, showcasing his career paths as a rhetorician and preacher. Yet, rather than placing undue focus on salvation or the afterlife, Emerson instead encourages the individual to make the most of the present moment—acceptance of one's circumstances, rather than wishful thinking, is the key to remaining hopeful and enjoying life.

Expressing contempt for the urbane "fine young people" who "despise life," Emerson declares that he values the present, and "the potluck of the day." He is thankful for "small mercies" rather than holding out for big accomplishments or seemingly profound experiences. Unlike his friend, who "expects everything of the universe," Emerson achieves contentment through expecting nothing of the world and accepting the "clangor and jangle of contrary tendencies" in his experience. Emerson claims that if people see the good in what they have, they will be happy. They should not think too hard about their experience, because "the great gifts are not got by analysis" and everything good is "on the highway," had in actual experience rather than in thoughts. In general, the mean between rational thought and sensual experience is the "temperate zone" of the soul, the place "of life, of thought, of spirit, of poetry."

In his essays, Emerson often decries the emptiness of social conventions. He bristles in particular at the refined culture of New England high society, of which he was a member. In contrast to the "fine young people," Emerson prefers the small joys in life, the humble "potluck" rather than the grand banquet. Note that, while in the first section of the essay, Emerson discussed his personal experience of grief, here he offers his personal experience of happiness. It is interesting, too, that Emerson implicitly compares the soul to the world when he discusses its "temperate zone." Throughout the essay, Emerson frequently discusses the "horizon" of individual experience, and later, he will like the soul to a sphere. These metaphors emphasize the insularity and subjectivity of the reality that each individual experiences.

Emerson generalizes his claim about the value of the middle zone between extremes to the realm of art. The best paintings are not the rarest, but rather the great paintings easily accessible in the great museums of the Vatican, the Uffizi, or the Louvre, and the natural art one can see in every sunset and sunrise, or in every human body. Similarly, Emerson prefers the literary classics, rather than the newest or the most learned works. Human imagination thrills at the exotic, and looks for the "nooks and secrets." But the most unusual people, animals, and art are not essentially different than their normal, easily accessible counterparts.

Once again, Emerson mixes psychology and aesthetics by extending a truth about experience of the world to experience of art. Continuing to spurn the culture of the wealthy and refined, Emerson claims to prefer the works of art that are most easily accessible. (There is a slight irony in the fact that he cites only European museums, which only privileged Americans can visit.)

Everyone and everything is merely a transient presence on earth. This means that no person or animal has privileged access to the world. Therefore, in the self and in art, the "mid-world is best." Saint is not essentially different from sinner, foreigner no different than native. Emerson also argues that the transience of all things in life means that people should be wary of religions or laws that emphasize the future above all. Emerson wishes to "set up the strong present tense" against all "rumors of wrath.". Similarly, Emerson disregards arguments about copyright, which were under debate at the time of writing, as well as other property laws concerned with futurity. Instead of concerning oneself with such questions, Emerson urges to "dig away in your garden" and enjoy life and property while one still can.

Emerson's belief in the subjectivity of knowledge also brings forth a striking moral relativism. Emerson shows how his conception of individual experience breaks down traditional moral and cultural categories, which are often based on a hierarchy of value and of connection to truth or authenticity. According to Christianity and its "rumors of wrath," for example, saints are holier than sinners, and a moment in the afterlife is worth years in the present on Earth. This mindset has the effect, Emerson claims, of emptying the present of experience—something Emerson himself has risked in his argument that subjects do not actually make contact with reality, but instead create their own reality through experience. Continuing to concentrate on the actual challenges of living, rather than on describing the human condition, Emerson urges his readers to cultivate the present like a garden. The image of the garden, besides recalling the Garden of Eden, also brings to mind the closing lines of Voltaire's Candide, in which Candide, having realized that philosophy will not lead to happiness, proclaims that instead of searching for eternal truth, "one must cultivate one's garden."

Human life is a delicate balance between "power and form." At first glance, the scholar, the artist, the orator, and the poet appear to be unbalanced, their arts like a "disease." But they become that way as a result of "irresistible nature." Each person who reads could become a writer, each person who looks at a sculpture could become a sculptor Each person is a "golden impossibility," his or her destiny determined by the very fine balance that nature has established in his or her soul.

Emerson continues to emphasize that humans are a mixture of contrary tendencies, namely "power and form," that must be kept in equilibrium. Artists, scholars, and specialized or unusual people of all types appear to be out of balance, but are actually in balance of another kind. Emerson emphasizes that artists or writers are not essentially different from normal people, but rather just further along a certain temperamental spectrum. This could be read as a kind of egalitarianism: artists are not special geniuses, but rather normal people with a subtly different temperament. Later on, Emerson will claim that great geniuses differ from normal people only in the "magnitude" of their experiences, not in the underlying nature of those experiences.

This balance may easily be upset by a random event or encounter. One's entire worldview may change as a result—only to revert to its former state the next day. The important point is that everything is out of one's control. Power s not directed by the "turnpikes of choice and will." Humanity's efforts to direct this power, through medicine or physics or diplomacy, are in vain.

Once again, Emerson emphasizes the importance of chance and the futility of will. Instead of traveling above-ground, where it can be seen, power— by which Emerson presumably means the creative force he discussed early in the essay— travels invisibly through subterranean tunnels and channels, less like a vehicle and more like water. This liquid imagery recalls Emerson's previous comparison of the gap that separates individuals to an "innavigable sea," a watery expanse that cannot easily be crossed.

Life is ultimately a "series of surprises," the mechanics of which are hidden from individuals. Everything interesting and worthwhile comes as a result of chance. Nature "hates calculators," who try to predict the future, and instead is "saltatory and alterative." In the same way, the human mind is only creative in bursts and is not consistent. Human beings "thrive by casualties," by chance not by intention. This is why the most admirable kind of people, according to Emerson, are those whose genius is not the intentional result of effort or calculation.

Although Emerson repeatedly claims that the workings of nature are unknowable to humans, and repeatedly denounces as vanity any claims to knowledge of how things really work, here he announces with great authority and rhetorical flair his own opinion about how things really work. In this sense, Emerson exemplifies the very subjectivity and insularity of mind that he observes in others throughout the essay. His analysis of true creativity as a spontaneous force suggests that the most pure and worthwhile form of genius is that which comes to the individual organically, rather than something that is forced.

Human actions—like nature—are essentially obscure to the observer. Hence every human being, simply by being unpredictable and by bringing randomness and chance into the world, manifests a kind of creative genius, since "every man is an impossibility, until he is born; every thing impossible, until we see a success." Every action represents the activity of forces that are hidden to humans, including writing. Therefore in virtually all areas, it is impossible to predict what will happen in the future—what one will create or do or how one will feel or think—for "the individual is always mistaken."

Previously, Emerson claimed that each mind has a "door" that always remains open to the divine energy of the creator, by which he or she may achieve some connection with things as they really are. Here, he describes a more subtle, and perhaps more unconscious or undetected, way in which each individual manifests the creative power of nature. He is careful to include his own activity as a writer in his discussion of human action—a kind of humble brag, since he is simultaneously minimizing his own authorship and claiming a form of divine inspiration.

The ancients understood the limitations of human knowledge, and hence elevated Chance into a god. This, however, only captures a small part of the wonder of the universe, just the creative spark and not the full "miracle of life," which occurs in growth. Emerson compares the growth of the soul to the development of the human embryo, occurring along several dimensions simultaneously. It is impossible for the subject to understand the many, seemingly contradictory elements of him- or herself and experience, but there is an order, a "musical perfection" that obtains in the seeming dissonance. The "ideal" is always governing experience, revealing itself in chance encounters with great souls or in random experiences of the beauty of nature. In these moments one experiences the beauty of the world like "the sunbright Mecca of the desert," as a "new yet unapproachable America" filled with promise.

This passage shows Emerson drawing from a dazzlingly wide variety of sources and traditions. Not only does he) draw from the latest developments in evolutionary biology to describe the multimodal growth of the human soul, he also cites pagan religions and includes a reference to Islam. He repeats the metaphor of life as music (used previously when he proclaimed his acceptance of the "clangor and jangle of contrary tendencies"), asserting, in the fashion of a proper Christian, that what sounds like disharmony to humans is actually harmony when listened to with God's ears. In a way, Emerson's own diverse prose is so rich with diverse references and allusions that it hovers between order and disorder, harmony and dissonance.

Emerson now corrects his definition of life as a "flux of moods" by adding the constant element of "consciousness." Consciousness operates on a "sliding scale," sometimes identified with the embodied experience of the subject and sometimes identified with the First Cause. This is called by many names (Fortune, Minerva, the Muse, the Holy Ghost, etc.). All refer to the "unbounded substance" that defies naming but is felt to be at the beating heart of the subject and the world more broadly. Emerson catalogues ancient attempts to pinpoint this First Cause: Thales called it water, Anaximenes called it air, Anaxagoras called it *nous* or "mind," Zoroaster called it fire, and Jesus called it love. Emerson includes in his catalogue Mencius's "vast-flowing vigor." All of these are attempts to name Being, Emerson claims.

Emerson once again draws evidence from a diverse array of sources and cultures, including ancient Chinese philosophy. Emerson was very much influenced by Eastern philosophy and literature, most explicitly in his concept of the "Over-Soul" (described in an essay of the same title), which was directly inspired by Hindu and Buddhist ideas about the relationship of the human soul to the great over-soul of the world. On a stylistic level, Emerson partially proves his argument about the unity of world traditions by conjoining them into a diverse but unifying list: even if these different divinities and cults weren't originally intended to refer to the same phenomenon, Emerson writes them together, equating them through his power as a writer.

All of these metaphors for Being, according to Emerson, get at one's sense that human life is only the hint of something greater. What is greatest about human behavior, it seems, is the great potential that it suggests. The "universal impulse to believe" is not restricted to one particular religious creed or doctrine but is something that has to do with the nature of the human spirit as it manifests in each individual. Individuals manifest their spirit in their actions, and hence do not need to explain themselves in language. Wherever one may be, that person is able to communicate with his or her friends through a mystical spiritual connection; Emerson claims that he himself "exert[s] the same quality of power in all places." Human life cannot be described by any set of religious beliefs, but instead always pushes outward, toward the "ideal." Any philosophy must take into account the way the human spirit evolves.

Emerson's generalizations run the risk of committing the same errors he sees in others: making claims about the way things really are without firm evidence. Perhaps his own statements are manifestations of the "universal impulse to believe" claims that are based on religious faith and spiritual intuition rather than personal experience. This reflects his belief that although the individual's experience of life is inherently subjective and unique, people are ultimately united by the fact that they are subject to the same conditions and limitations as human beings.

Emerson now takes a step back and considers the nature of the thought that he has been describing.. Self-consciousness, he claims, was the real "Fall" from grace. Before humans were conscious of their own existence, there was no difference between subject and object: people were not conscious of the boundaries of the self. Now, however, the human subject is aware that it is separate from objects and "threatens to absorb all things," reveling in its power to do so. God, Nature, literature—all are recognized as subjective phenomena.

In a moment of self-conscious literary reflection, Emerson laments the emergence of a more general human self-consciousness. The real "Fall" from grace occurred not when Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden, but rather when human beings became conscious of their own existence. Perhaps Emerson has in mind the moment when Adam and Eve became conscious of their own nudity and started to question the way they looked and acted. Christians believe that the Fall from Eden led to Original Sin, and is the ultimate source of all the sinful behavior of humans, like greed, vanity, and so on. Emerson draws a close analogy between the Christian fall and the existential fall he describes when he states that the self-conscious subject "threatens to absorb all things" in a kind of theft or tyranny, and is guilty of a kind of vanity in its belief that it is the only thing that actually exists.

What Emerson is describing is a kind of relativism, in which there is no such thing as a hierarchy of values. His tone is not entirely critical as he describes the way in which the proud are humiliated because their pretensions to superiority seem ridiculous from Emerson's philosophical viewpoint. Similarly, religious definitions of good and bad are revealed to be nothing else than subjective definitions. Seemingly sacred human relationships, like friendship or even marriage, are no more stable than the changing individuals who take part in them.

The consequences of Emerson's theory of the individual are potentially quite radical. It boils down to a claim that no one really knows better than anyone else, and so individuals must come to truth on their terms. Not only is it impossible to accept traditional values, it is also impossible to take part in relationships as traditionally conceived. Emerson is here describing an individualism that isn't just an aspiration or an ideal (as in "Self-Reliance"), but a necessity.

Each individual is the "receiver of Godhead," manifesting a creative power that prevents him or her from being a static, stable partner in a social interaction. This divine force has the effect of isolating individuals, preventing love from occurring between two individuals because they are always striving to grow and to change. "The universe is the bride of the soul," and the union between two individual souls is only temporary.

Although the second section of "Experience" is, on the whole, more hopeful and optimistic than the first section, it is not optimistic about everything: social life still remains problematic. Emerson writes often of the virtues of solitude for work and thought. Here, he suggests that solitude is inevitable, because no human connection can last indefinitely.

Every soul, then, is a unity and cannot accommodate the existence of other souls, "admitting no co-life." The individual operates under belief that it is the only true soul. This is one of the reasons, Emerson suggests, that people are able to tolerate in themselves the moral flaws and crimes that they condemn in others. Subjectively, one understands the complex motivations that lead to a person acting one way or another. One cannot really feel oneself to be guilty of a crime. This is why it is difficult or maybe even impossible for an individual to understand a concept like sin. Sin has "an objective experience, but no subjective." It is a projection, but, like "crime," a category projected from the outside.

Emerson again suggests that people are incapable of really understanding that other individuals—other experiencing subjects—exist in the world. Other people exist for a subject only as objects, as things. (This is one of the reasons Emerson was not ruined by the death of his son, Waldo, and was able to recover similarly to how he would recover from the loss of something much less precious than a loved one.) The inability to imagine others as proper subjects explains why people act so hypocritically, condemning "crime" and "sin" in others but tolerating the same behaviors in themselves. Emerson's undermining of moral labels became an inspiration for Nietzsche a few decades later in texts like The Genealogy of Morality, *where he claims that "good" and "evil" are constructs and not meaningful categories.*

This relativism applies to everything, for the entire universe "wear[s] our color" and every object "fall[s]" into the experiencing subject. Experience occurs in a subject—it is experienced by a subject—and therefore everything in it only really exists *for* the subject. The limits of the self are the limits of the world and the limits of language. Great souls—the Greek gods Hermes and Cadmus, Columbus, Newton, Napoleon—are like geologists who reveal new areas of the soul: they show what the soul is capable of. Their "partial action" in a certain direction expands their soul in a certain way, hence shining the light for others to follow suit. The soul will achieve its "due sphericity" when it has been similarly expanded in every direction.

Emerson once again uses the metaphor of color to describe the way the individual experiences a subjective version of reality. The self becomes the container of the world; the limits of the self are the limits of reality for the subject, and the limits of language reflect the limits of knowledge. Great souls should not be viewed as inventors, Emerson claims, but rather as expanders who push the limits of the soul outward, and point out the value of what was already known. The fact that Emerson aligns mythical heroes with modern scientists, explorers, and emperors is striking, and shows that Emerson is interested less in what these individuals actually accomplished externally and more in how they lived internally.

That said, the experience of great individuals, pushing outward the frontiers of the soul, is not fundamentally different than the experience of normal people or even animals. Emerson uses the example of a cat playing with its tail (an example famously employed in one of Emerson's favorite books, Montaigne's *Essays*). An observer sees the cat playing, but perhaps the cat sees "hundreds of figures performing complex dramas" or all types. Maybe the human is similarly isolated, and the hurly-burly of life is just the projection of one's mind. Emerson concludes by remarking that all experience, no matter how grand—when Columbus encountered America, Kepler observed the planets, a reader reads a book, or even when a cat plays with its tail—is structurally the same. Experience is always nothing more and nothing less than the interaction of a subject and object.

Once again, Emerson reveals himself to be an egalitarian: great individuals are not essentially different from so-called normal people, and so everyone has the potential to expand the human soul. In fact, Emerson is so open-minded as to suggest that even animals may have great souls. The example of the cat playing with her tail is famously employed in one of Emerson's favorite books, Montaigne's Essays.

Emerson acknowledges that certain people will not appreciate his insistence on "our constitutional necessity of seeing things under private aspects, or saturated with our humors," particularly those who are religious. In response to the potentially destabilizing force of this relativism, one must develop "self-trust," and people must "possess [their] axis more firmly." One must discover one's own wisdom, rather than simply inheriting it from others, or adopting the moral code of a religion. The best way to help other people is to first help oneself, because just as one possesses the key to one's self-mastery, so do others possess their own key. This is why the American tendency to talk and listen to everyone may do more harm than good.

Emerson has argued throughout "Experience" that traditional morality and social structures have no real basis. He calls for a radical reevaluation of subjecthood, which inevitably requires a reconceptualization of citizenship, friendship, love, and other fundamental human behaviors and conventions. Since he has argued throughout the essay that true social relations are effectively impossible, here Emerson claims that the only way a person can really help another person is to model virtuous and wise behavior. This is precisely what Emerson is doing in "Experience," and in his Essays *more broadly. This may be one of the reasons he choice the essay form in the first place: the essay does not tell its reader how to think, but rather* shows *the reader how* one *person thinks. Within an essay, Emerson can make as many generalizations as he wishes; but the essay itself makes no claim on the reader.*

Emerson uses the example of Orestes, in Aeschylus's tragedy the *Eumenides*. The Greek hero petitions Apollo for help, but the god refuses because he does not belong to the human sphere and ultimately must fulfill his fate, rather than simply pitying Orestes.

The reference to Aeschylus at the end of this essay is ominous: the story of Orestes being hounded by the fates, told in the third and final installment of the Oresteia, *is one of the classic stories of human suffering. Emerson invites the reader to see Orestes, and by extension all those who suffer and ask for help, not through the eyes of the play's viewers, but rather through the ultra-rational eyes of Apollo. The example also suggests that the stakes of social interaction are extremely high: what Emerson has been discussing in the essay has important implications for the soul.*

Emerson explains that all of the elements he has been discussing—reality as a kind of illusion, temperament as the defining feature of experience, the inability of humans to go beyond the surfaces of things, the importance of surprise and the unexpected—are "threads on the loom of time." Emerson explains that these are "the lords of life" mentioned in the epigraph. But Emerson cannot do anything more than report them: he is not wise enough to order them into a "code." The "fruit," then, of his inquiry is limited to a kind of moderation, a stoic reserve. "I am and I have," Emerson writes, "but I do not get." Fortune governs life.

Following the citation of a Greek tragedy, Emerson invokes the ancient image of the "loom" spun by the Fates, who weave a thread for each human life. The weaving is, of course, out of human control, just as Emerson has insisted the laws governing human life are beyond human understanding. Emerson here states most clearly the essayistic, or provisional, nature of his thought: he suggests that he has presented his reflections only, not a code of behavior to be closely followed. If one should imitate anything about the essayist, it is his manner and style: a worldview predicated on an awareness of what is in one's control, and what is out of it.

Some people say that doing is better than knowing. But if Emerson is able truly to know what he has described in "Experience," he will be satisfied. Modeling the kind of self-trust he describes earlier, Emerson tells the reader that his experience of reality is not reality itself. He will temper his experience in life—the seeming impossibility of getting anything accomplished, or of effecting change in politics—with the philosophical insights he has described in the essay. He will remind himself that, even though life is mostly filled with mundane routines and trivial social interactions, there are moments of solitude when the individual channels the divine force of creation. These moments give the individual a taste of what might eventually happen at the end of "the true romance which the world exists to realize": the "transformation of genius into practical power," a mystical transcendence of human limitation.

Emerson concludes his essay by repeating his commitment to live by the principles he has articulated. Although he insists on limitation and reserve, in the very final lines he gestures toward a fantastic future, a sort of Hegelian end of history, in which the human soul may transcend its limitation. Although Emerson has repeatedly claimed that life is governed by chance and fortune, and that the divine plan is beyond human understanding, here he claims that what happens on earth is a "romance." In Emerson's view, life is a story with a triumphant conclusion, the realization of which is the very purpose of human existence. With this bombastic claim, the essay itself transcends its limits, soaring off into an optimism and idealism that Emerson had restrained until the very last moment.

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