

# Transcendentalism

**Transcendentalism** was a group of new ideas in literature, religion, culture, and philosophy that emerged in New England in the early to middle 19th century. It is sometimes called **American transcendentalism** to distinguish it from other uses of the word *transcendental*.

Transcendentalism began as a protest against the general state of culture and society, and in particular, the state of intellectualism at Harvard and the doctrine of the Unitarian church taught at Harvard Divinity School. Among transcendentalists' core beliefs was an ideal spiritual state that 'transcends' the physical and empirical and is only realized through the individual's intuition, rather than through the doctrines of established religions. Prominent transcendentalists included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Orestes Brownson, William Henry Channing, James Freeman Clarke, Christopher Pearse Cranch, Convers Francis, Margaret Fuller, Frederick Henry Hedge, Sylvester Judd, Elizabeth Peabody, George Ripley, Amos Bronson Alcott, and Jones Very.

## History

The publication of Emerson's 1836 essay *Nature* is usually taken to be the watershed moment at which transcendentalism became a major cultural movement. Emerson wrote in his essay "The American Scholar": "We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds ... A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men." Emerson closed the essay by calling for a revolution in human consciousness to emerge from the new idealist philosophy:

So shall we come to look at the world with new eyes. It shall answer the endless inquiry of the intellect, — What is truth? and of the affections, — What is good? by yielding itself passive to the educated Will. ... Build, therefore, your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the



pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions. A correspondent revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit.

In the same year, transcendentalism became a coherent movement with the founding of the Transcendental Club in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on September 8, 1836, by prominent New England intellectuals including George Putnam, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Frederick Henry Hedge. From 1840, the group published frequently in their journal *The Dial*, along with other venues. The movement was originally termed "Transcendentalists" as a pejorative term, suggesting their position was beyond sanity and reason.

The practical aims of the transcendentalists were varied; some among the group linked it with utopian social change and, in the case of Brownson, it joined explicitly with early socialism, while others found it an exclusively individual and idealist project. Emerson believed the latter. In his 1842 lecture "The Transcendentalist", Emerson suggested that the goal of a purely transcendental outlook on life was impossible to attain in practice:

You will see by this sketch that there is no such thing as a transcendental *party*; that there is no pure transcendentalist; that we know of no one but prophets and heralds of such a philosophy; that all who by strong bias of nature have leaned to the spiritual side in doctrine, have stopped short of their goal. We have had many harbingers and forerunners; but of a purely spiritual life, history has afforded no example. I mean, we have yet no man who has leaned entirely on his character, and eaten angels' food; who, trusting to his sentiments, found life made of miracles; who, working for universal aims, found himself fed, he knew not how; clothed, sheltered, and weaponed, he knew not how, and yet it was done by his own hands. ... Shall we say, then, that transcendentalism is the Saturnalia or excess of Faith; the presentiment of a faith proper to man in his integrity, excessive only when his imperfect obedience hinders the satisfaction of his wish.

By the 1850s, Emerson believed the movement was dying out, especially after the death of Margaret Fuller in 1850. "All that can be said", Emerson wrote, "is, that she represents an interesting hour & group in American cultivation".



## Influence on other movements

Transcendentalists were strong believers in the power of the individual and divine messages. Their beliefs are closely linked with those of the Romantics. The movement directly influenced the growing movement of *Mental Sciences* of the mid 1800s which would later become known as the New Thought movement. New Thought draws directly from the transcendentalists, particularly Emerson. New Thought considers Emerson its intellectual father. Ernest Holmes founder of Religious Science church was greatly influenced by transcendentalism. The Fillmores the founders of Unity: Malinda Cramer and Nona L. Brooks Founders of Divine Science were greatly influenced by Transcendentalism.

## Origins

Transcendentalism was rooted in the transcendental philosophy of Immanuel Kant (and of German Idealism more generally), which the New England intellectuals of the early 19th century embraced as an alternative to the Lockean "sensualism" of their fathers and of the Unitarian church, finding this alternative in Vedic thought, German idealism, and English Romanticism.

The transcendentalists desired to ground their religion and philosophy in transcendental principles: principles not based on, or falsifiable by, sensuous experience, but deriving from the inner, spiritual or mental essence of the human. Immanuel Kant had called "all knowledge transcendental which is concerned not with objects but with our mode of knowing objects." The transcendentalists were largely unacquainted with German philosophy in the original, and relied primarily on the writings of Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Victor Cousin, Germaine de Staël, and other English and French commentators for their knowledge of it. In contrast, they were intimately familiar with the English Romantics, and the transcendental movement may be partially described as a slightly later, American outgrowth of Romanticism. Another major influence was the mystical spiritualism of Emanuel Swedenborg.



Thoreau in *Walden* spoke of the debt to the Vedic thought directly, as did other members of the movement:

In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagavat Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial; and I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions. I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Brahmin, priest of Brahma, and Vishnu and Indra, who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the Vedas, or dwells at the root of a tree with his crust and water-jug. I meet his servant come to draw water for his master, and our buckets as it were grate together in the same well. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges.

## Criticism

Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a novel, *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), satirizing the movement, and based it on his experiences at Brook Farm, a short-lived utopian community founded on transcendental principles. Edgar Allan Poe had a deep dislike for transcendentalism, calling its followers "Frogpondians" after the pond on Boston Common. He ridiculed their writings in particular by calling them "metaphor-run," lapsing into "obscurity for obscurity's sake" or "mysticism for mysticism's sake." One of his short stories, "Never Bet the Devil Your Head", is a clear attack on transcendentalism, which the narrator calls a "disease". The story specifically mentions the movement and its flagship journal *The Dial*, though Poe denied that he had any specific targets.



## Other meanings of transcendentalism

### Transcendental idealism

The term *transcendentalism* sometimes serves as shorthand for "transcendental idealism," which is the philosophy of Immanuel Kant and later Kantian and German Idealist philosophers.

### Transcendental theology

*Further information: Transcendence (religion)*

Another alternative meaning for *transcendentalism* is the classical philosophy that God transcends the manifest world. As John Scotus Erigena put it to Frankish king Charles the Bald in the year 840 A.D., "We do not know what God is. God himself doesn't know what He is because He is not anything. Literally God is not, because He transcends being."