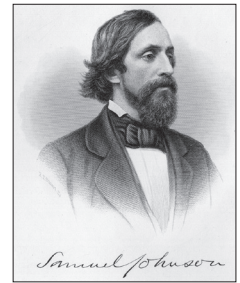


Transcendentalism.

As defined by

SAMUEL JOHNSON (1822-82)



That the name “Transcendentalism” was given, a century ago, to a method in philosophy opposed to the theory of Locke — that all knowledge comes from the senses — is more widely known than the fact that what this method affirmed and involved is of profound import for all generations. It emphasized Mind as formative force behind all definable contents or acts of consciousness, — as that which makes it possible to speak of any thing as known. It recognized, as primal condition of knowing the transmutation of sense-impressions by original laws of mind, whose constructive power is not to be explained or measured by the data of sensation: just as they use the eye and ear to transform unknown spatial motions into the obviously human conceptions which we call color and sound. All this the Lockian system overlooked; a very serious omission, as regards both science and common sense.

Locke was probably somewhat misconstrued. He meant that sense-impressions come first in our conscious experience; his concern being with the apparent process, rather than with the real origin of our knowledge. He was aiming, not only to reduce to plain good sense the medieval metaphysics of his time, but also to combat an enthusiasm of the self-deifying sort, resulting from the spiritual ferment of the English Revolution. He had seen how easily fanatical ecstasies were glorified as vision and revelation, and how perilous they were to the political and religious liberty which he was building into positive institutions. His famous comparison of the mind to a sheet of blank paper was, I suppose, a vigorous way of repudiating these imaginary inspirations and emphasizing the public and common elements of experience, rather than the startling assertion it would seem to be, that the substance by and through which we think and know is of itself sheer passivity and emptiness. He rejected “innate ideas,” considered as distinct conceptions, supernaturally conveyed into the mind, and there preexisting, ready for use, independent of education and even of growth. His

crusade against this antecedence of ready-made ideas as a mass of concrete details prior to experience seems to have drawn away his attention from other and better modes of conceiving the originality and primacy of mind. He posits “experience” as the only source of knowledge; forgetting to inquire how the “blank paper,” which could not respond to innate impressions, should be in any degree more competent to report results of “experience” without constructive energies of its own. To pretend that it could do so would have been simply to flee from supernaturalism in one form to fall into it in another. Here is the unconscious incoherence in Locke’s account of the matter, as in that of Stuart Mill, the more recent apostle of “experience.” Yet Locke’s own phraseology shows that his good sense was not unaware of facts wholly incompatible with the “blank paper” theory; as when he says (Book II, chap. 1, § 4) that the “operations of the soul (in reflection) do furnish the understanding with another set of ideas which could not be had from things without, we observing them in ourselves.”

Every thing depends, if we would fairly interpret a thinker, on recognizing the emphasis given to certain elements of his thought by his special aim, and reading between the lines other elements, which he evidently takes for granted, as not needing statement at all. Locke, though a clear-headed man and liberal politician, was not a metaphysical thinker. The profound meaning involved in the fact that such constant ideas as Substance, Personality, Law, Cause, “could not be had from things without,” never interested his practical and concrete mind, which thought it quite sufficient to mass such facts under the vague term “experience,” and let them go at that. In this respect, his example is largely followed in days when science, building upon “experience,” is to a very great extent absorbed in collecting innumerable physical details. Yet I doubt if Locke would have relished being made the father of the “Sensational School,” and put into the limbo of for ever decanting sense-impressions into mental bottles to prove that

physical phenomena are the sole authors and finishers of man. Had he inquired into the distinctive origin and significance of what he called “reflection,” he might have reached the starting point of Transcendentalism. He was a keen observer of palpable processes; and this habit is very apt to hide those conditions in mental faculty which the processes do not exhibit, but imply; until, as in much modern method which passes for scientific, the mere succession of phenomena is substituted for the substance in which they inhere. Neither the self-consciousness of mind as such, nor the forces that lie behind conscious understanding, attracted Locke’s utilitarian temperament. He was, so far, the ancestor of that school of evolutionists which holds itself at war with Transcendentalism. But he could not have anticipated the positive denial of such transcendental conditions in the next century by his enthusiastic disciples, Helvetius, Condillac, and others, who were preparing the French mind to throw aside, in sheer reaction, not only the continuity of human evolution through the past, but that constant, undemonstrable element that makes the prime condition of present certitude.

What we conceive these schools to have misprized is the living substance and function of Mind itself. Conscious of its own energy; productive of its own processes; active even in receiving; giving its own construction to its incomes from the unknown through sense; thus involved in those very contents of time and space which, as historical antecedents, appear to create it, — mind is obviously the exponent of forces more spontaneous and original than any special product of its own experience. Behind all these products must be that substance in and through which they are produced. Or are we, as Tame will have it, mere trains of sensation in the void; successions of thoughts without a thinker; incessant flowing, yet no living stream; a process where what proceeds may be neglected or is naught? Can the knower be mere

resultant of his own knowledge, call it “experience” or what you will? How should there be any knowing of things at all, except there be first one competent to know, whose nature is father and fount of the act of cognition? ’When you assert that all is from experience, have you forgotten the experiencer himself? Or, if you reply that he is of course taken for granted, then pray do not immediately consign him over among his products, but consider what your concession involves. Is he not more than all his past processes, and primal condition of all that are to come? If personality be not real, science is at war with human consciousness. If it be real, it involves powers which constantly condition experience and determine its forms and results. Nor can it be regarded as a mere product or transfer of the past experiences of the race, since the transmutation of one conscious personal identity into another is inconceivable; and no transfer of experiences could ever produce an experiencer. To say that this is idealism may remand the statement to the dictionary, but does not refute it.



Analysis of thought as essential and primal leads to the recognition of certain ground-forms of thought as universal, and therefore as known only by transcending the observation of facts; since no number of observations, or “sensible particulars,” could of themselves ever prove a universal principle, but require supplementing by larger forces of mind. . . . Of course the transcendentalist cannot mean by it that at all times and by all persons the truths now specified are seen in the same objective form, nor even that they are always *consciously* recognized in any form. He means that, being involved in the movement of intelligence, they indicate realities, whether well or ill conceived, and are apprehended in proportion as man becomes aware of his own mental processes.

“Transcendentalism” was presented as a Free Religious Association lecture at the Horticultural Hall on January 25, 1874. In the audience were fellow Transcendentalists Christopher Pearse Cranch and Amos Bronson Alcott. The lecture was published in 1877, reprinted in the *Radical Review* for November, 1877, and collected by Longfellow in *Lectures, Essays, and Sermons* following Johnson’s death. O. B. Frothingham, whose book *Transcendentalism in New England: a History*, had appeared the previous year, praised Johnson’s “calm, lofty, reasonable interpretation,” which he contrasted with the “crude presentations of Transcendentalism by the older schools of Parker, Channing, and others.” He found himself a Transcendentalist again after reading Johnson’s essay, “philosophically supported in the attitude which I have taken and maintain, as a preacher.” This is a brief excerpt.