

# Imitation in self-reliance: a paradox?

[Experience](#), [Self Reliance](#)



Ralph Waldo Emerson was a highly acclaimed philosopher, among other achievements. With a firm transcendentalist mindset, Emerson wrote a number of essays dedicated to the transcendentalist movement of the 19th century; one of which was Self-Reliance. In this thought-provoking text, Emerson expresses his opinions on a number of topics which revolve around the subject of “ self-reliance” in an oracular and authoritative manner. His self-assured statements therefore may come off as unreasonable at times, and even contradictory. This essay will look into two quotes from Self-Reliance which appear to be inconsistent with one another, and then attempt to harmonize the two by examining Emerson’s messages in depth. One of the major topics Emerson discusses in Self-Reliance is “ imitation” and how this negatively affects civilisation. It is brought to light in the second paragraph of his entire essay, and from the very first line of which readers are able to discern his views on the matter, as he straightforwardly writes, “ There is a time in every man’s education when he arrives at the conviction ... that imitation is suicide.” In very simple words Emerson conveys his standpoint. He goes on to elaborate on the ignorance of imitation, insisting that society demands conformity out of every man and therefore by imitation we conform and stray from individuality – which he calls our “ genius” – and so suffer from losing ourselves, which is similar to suicide. Emerson fundamentally repeats this notion throughout his essay: “ Insist on yourself; never imitate” is only one of a copious of instances where he emphasizes on the importance of rejecting imitation. However, towards the end of his essay, when he begins to list final topics for scrutiny – such as issues of prayer, society and progress – Emerson brings back the matter of

imitation while elaborating on his point numbered “ 3”, where he criticizes the concept of travel. Here he states, “ We imitate; and what is imitation but the travelling of the mind?” after denouncing men who travel “ to be amused” and declaring that travel is, on the whole, an absolutely unnecessary act.

At first glance, it appears as if this second quote regarding imitation contradicts the first, giving the impression that “ the travelling of the mind” is similar to meditation, whereby the brain travels to distant places without leaving the physical comfort of one’s home. Since he proclaims that “ the soul is no traveller: the wise man stays at home with the soul,” it is evident that Emerson believes that “ wise men” do not need to leave their homes to seek beauty or knowledge, as they are able to do so at home and solely through imagination. This is exemplified when Emerson states, “ At home I dream that at Naples, at Rome, I can be intoxicated with beauty, and lose my sadness.” Thus, it seems as though to support this conviction, he writes, “ Our minds travel when we are forced to stay at home. We imitate; and what is imitation but the travelling of the mind?” Now it appears that Emerson is in favour of imitation, as it is what allows our minds to travel without leaving our homes, as wise men do. However, as he continues on this explanation, Emerson describes the use of imitation in the features of “ our houses”, proclaiming that people imitate foreign tastes, such as the Doric or Gothic architecture, in the design of buildings. He also mentions that “ our shelves are garnished with foreign ornaments”, which highlights our habit to imitate foreign art and beauty, and to essentially mould our lives to resemble those of non-native lands. Emerson explains this in blatant

disapproval, summarizing his point by stating that Americans can find beauty far closer than they think, and so do not require travelling abroad to find inspiration for art. With this, it is obvious that Emerson once again scorns imitation. To sum up, the quote, “ what is imitation but the travelling of the mind?” does not actually support imitation. Although it appears that Emerson advocates travelling with the mental capacity and not physically traversing about, in this quote he means that “ the travelling of the mind” is similar to the unnecessary wandering of it. Emerson firmly dictates the needlessness of travelling abroad, as people cannot help but glorify the distinctiveness of foreign parts rather than celebrating the beauty and art that surrounds them in their native land. He supports this by mentioning that even while travelling to Naples in his mind, he realises the “ stern fact, the sad self, unrelenting, identical” which he “ fled from” is still there beside him. This means that in spite of travelling far away, he cannot flee from his problems, and he implies the same for all mankind. Thus, the two quotes which initially appear contradictory are in fact relaying a similar message: imitation is unfavourable and obstructive in all aspects of life, be it in everyday life or in travel; to our souls and to our homes, and so should be condemned wholeheartedly.