

# Illusion and reality in emerson's experience



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In Experience, Ralph Waldo Emerson discusses the dichotomy of illusion and an absolute realm. Through the exercise of skepticism, Emerson establishes an uncertain knowledge of the phenomenal realm of reality; neither the intellect nor emotion can grasp the meaning of the events occurring in the outside world. Similarly, absolute truth remains obscured from Emerson's perception. Nevertheless, he remains certain of its presence, and responds to the threat of illusion with spontaneous appeals to higher knowledge.

Although waking up, so to speak, proves impossible from Emerson's current point of perception, Emerson maintains faith in the presence of a holistic reality. His response to a valueless external world proves to be, throughout the piece, an appeal to integrate with a "creative power", or higher realm.

(281) Therefore, Emerson ultimately advocates for the abandonment of illusion in favor of experience.

While Emerson identifies "illusion" as a separate "lord of life" in his opening poem, his essay implies that all perceptual subjective forms of knowledge are fundamentally illusory.(269) The lords of life — Illusion, Temperament, Succession, Surface, Surprise, Reality, and Subjectiveness — distort our experience, disabling our connection with the absolute. Our disconnection from the absolute accounts for our general disorientation: "Ghostlike we glide through nature, and should not know our place again.", Emerson writes. (271) This is among the first of Emerson's many laments regarding man's departure from Nature, a "mid-world" he describes as an intersection between "sensation and intellect", or power and form. While Emerson frequently rejects that a complete and lasting experience with the absolute is possible, he suggests that specific forms of living will lead to our encounter

with a deeper cause. Therefore, Emerson's primary concern throughout the essay is the movement away from perceptual knowledge and into experience. Over the course of the paper, he recognizes the overwhelming quality of worldly illusions and, using the model of a mid-world, or intersection between spirit and form, attempts to find respite from confusion.

The essay's opening metaphor introduces the dichotomy of illusion and truth. Emerson compares perception to a lingering sleep: " Sleep lingers about our lifetime about our eyes; as night hovers all day in the boughs of the fir-tree. All things swim and glimmer. Our life is not so much threatened as our perception." (270, 271) Through the metaphor of a shadow cast within a fir-tree, Emerson describes the nature of illusion: darkness, or shadow, obscures the unalterable truth of daylight. Regardless of our obstructed vision, Emerson implies, daytime continues on. Reality is real while illusion remains illusory, regardless of our perceptual defects. Furthermore, Emerson's comparison of illusion to shadow suggests that misperception is a natural consequence of human existence. His lamentation in the following paragraph regarding our obsession with routine emphasizes the inescapable quality of the illusory realm. Throughout his piece, Emerson emphasizes the inescapable quality of perception, for example, when describing life as a series of illusion we travel between.

In response to his assertion that perception distorts our vision of the world, Emerson attempts to identify the cause of our depravity: " Did our birth fall in some fit of indigence and frugality in nature, that she was so sparing of her fire and so liberal of her earth, that it appears to us that we lack the affirmative principle, and though we have health and reason, yet we have no

superfluity of spirit for new creation?" (271) Due to a lack of spirit, or "fire", the experienter is overwhelmed by worldly forms. Furthermore, this quote explicates that spirit stands apart from "health and reason", or bodily states and the intellect. Throughout his essay, Emerson refers to the spiritual realm as an antidote to illusion. Emerson's description of spirit as an "affirmative principle" alludes to the partiality, or individuality, of illusion, a recurrent unsolvable problem reiterated throughout Experience. Additionally, the word "affirmative" implies certainty; through contact with the spirit, confidence in the ultimate nature of reality can be obtained.

Emerson's personal response to grief — an attractive mode of illusion whose "spikes and edges" offer a false sense of certainty — illustrates his faith in a greater, albeit imperceptible, truth. While Emerson's attitude towards his son may be read as a skepticism against life, one may also interpret his refusal to indulge grief as an affirmation of faith: "Grief, like all the rest, plays about the surface, and never introduces me into the reality, for contact with which, we would even pay the costly price of sons and lovers.", Emerson states.

(271) Although Emerson feels extraordinary pain, he commits to arriving nearer to truth rather than indulging his immediate impulse. Although he desires to grieve, he chooses not to: "I grieve that grief can teach [me] nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature." (284) Grief, therefore, fails to offer genuine relief from pain. The rejection of grief as a subjective, non-ultimate reality, however difficult, promises to lead Emerson away from his isolated perception and closer to truth. Therefore, Emerson demonstrates his faith in an undistorted reality; illusion, no matter how appealing, proves ultimately unreal.

Similarly, Emerson invalidates the measurement of temperament because such study overlooks the reality of the soul. Emerson argues that sensory or material signs, although indicative of an object's appearance, fail to describe the fundamental Beingness of the object they belong to. While discussing the outlook of physicians and scientists identifying personality, Emerson writes: "They esteem each man the victim of another, who winds him round his finger by knowing the law of his being, and by such cheap sign boards as the color of his beard, or the slope of his occiput, reads the inventory of his fortunes and character. The grossest ignorance does not disgust like this impudent knowingness." (272) Because descriptions of temperament claim that a person can be wholly known through limiting characteristics, such as character and behavior, Emerson rejects the scientific study of persona. When conclusions are proven accurate, Emerson "distrusts the facts"(284). While the intellect might be capable of describing visible personality, Emerson rejects the such indications as invalid.

Temperament proves inherently illusory and inescapable. He describes it as a "uniform tune which the revolving barrel of the music box must play." (272) However, his statement that temperament "prevails over everything of time, place, and condition" does not erase his belief in an authentic, or non-material self which cannot be affected by the realm of illusion. (272) However, Emerson contradicts his earlier claim that temperament cannot be escaped, when he suggests that virtue sublimates the presence of temperament: "when virtue is in presence, all subordinate powers sleep." (272) Again, Emerson suggests illusion cannot be escaped, then responds with an appeal to a higher truth. Later in the paragraph, Emerson writes: "

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 higher 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." (273) In other words, upon becoming aware of a superior creative power, we hurl our former, analysis-based understandings into hell. From an absolute perspective, all indications of illusion, regardless of their particular form, are wholly unimportant.

Theoretical thought, or rationalization, proves as problematic as mood and temperament; without experience, theory keeps the experiencer within the subjective realm. While describing the futility of unsupplemented intellectual ideas, Emerson states: " Intellectual tasting of life will not supersede muscular activity. If a man should consider the nicety of the passage of a piece of bread down his throat, he would starve."... " Life is not intellectual or critical, but sturdy." (275) This statement ties in with his claim that " life is not dialectics". (274) Since over-engagement with theory distracts the experiencer from sensory life, Emerson rejects it as valueless. Furthermore, Emerson suggests that theorizing without practical application may potentially guide the thinker towards all conclusions. Therefore, Emerson suggests, the intellect cannot evaluate the superiority of one belief over another. " There are objections to every course of life and action, and the practical wisdom infers an indifferency, from the omnipresence of objection." (286) In the same way that reality is " absolute" in Emersonian terms, illusion possesses an all-pervasive quality as well; all objections are of the

same fundamental quality, in that they are not ultimately true. Opinions of the intellect, as Emerson explicates later in the paper, ultimately suggest nothing. Through honest analysis of thought's limitations, Emerson once again redirects his reader to the realm of experience.

The intellect's primary failure, Emerson clarifies, is its failure to analyze. This is expressed most clearly in the essay's opening. While we as experiencers can know what happens, we cannot know why it is important to us. In the essay's opening paragraph, Emerson discusses the general human failure to assess progress on any given day, stating: " We do not know today whether we are busy or idle."(270) The intellect cannot identify or determine the quality of its own experience. Therefore, " critical analysis" should be abandoned; instead, we should attempt to experience moments as they occur. (270) While describing our tendency to compare ourselves to one another, Emerson expresses frustration with the human tendency to place faith in one's perception: " Our life looks trivial to us, and we shun to record it. Men seem to have learned of the horizon the art of perpetual retreating and reference."(270) Because of our mis-colored perception, we fail to look the present in the eye; however, ironically, genuine perception only proves possible in the present. Furthermore, Emerson's horizon metaphor suggests that men have ironically mis-learned from Nature. While Nature would otherwise lead us closer to truth, our misinterpretation of the sunrise pulls us farther into the dream. The solution to opinion, which culminates into a kind of lasting distraction from ourselves, exists in the present moment. " How many individuals can we count in society? how many actions? how many opinions? So much of our time is preparation, so much routine, and so much

retrospect, that the pith of each man's genius contracts itself to a very few hours."(270) Through the abandonment of opinion, or rejection of intellectual illusion, genuine insight from an inspired realm may be gathered.

Emerson's rejection of analysis does not necessarily contradict his claim that the intellect reveals absolute truth. In Emerson's view, the intellect can be used to propagate illusion or to perceive absolute truth. Later, Emerson states that the intellect proves morally sound because it stands beyond value judgments. " Sin seen from the thought, is a diminution or less: seen from the conscience or will, it is pravity or bad. The intellect names it shade, absence of light, and no essence. The conscience must feel it as essence, essential evil. This it is not: it has an objective existence, but no subjective" (281) When used for objective perception, the intellect assists rather than detracts from experience.

Although Emerson rejects the validity of illusion, he returns to considerable skepticism about one's ability to entirely remove these " colored and distorted lenses". (281) Regarding perception, Emerson writes: " 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."(281) While accepting the limitations of illusion, however, Emerson makes multiple attempts to navigate past fixed perception and into experience: the avoidance of stasis, described by the stars in the sky, the abandonment of moral judgment, and engagement with the present moment are all methods of integrating into a deeper reality which Emerson claims offer revelation. Ultimately, Emerson

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describes the universe as “ the bride of the soul”, which can either “ sleep or wake” the “ deity which sleeps forever in every soul.” (281) Furthermore, Emerson affirms that no “ force of the intellect” can attribute the object, or power, which allows this subject to sleep or wake. While the intellect may assist in the revelation of truth, “ forces of the intellect” cannot replace spiritual power.

Emerson's two closing paragraphs reaffirm the complementary dynamic between illusion and experience. While Emerson admits the limitations of knowledge, stating that he is “ very content with knowing, if only [he] could know”, he prompts his reader to pursue “ sanity and revelation”, or the “ transformation of genius into practical power.”(284, 285) Although these statements appear contradictory, they accord with the concepts presented earlier in the essay. Knowledge, which stands beyond the realm of illusion, proves inaccessible; experience, existing in a momentary mid-world, enables the expression of the unknowable absolute. The final line of Emerson's essay suggests, therefore, that although we cannot grasp knowledge intellectually, we can express our connection with an absolute universal law. While the absolute cannot be understood, it can be experienced; the absolute, or “ genius”, achieves expression without intellectual understanding.

In the final paragraph of his essay, Emerson distinguishes thought from knowledge. While thought, although unknowable through empirical methods, remains inaccessible to Emerson, he remains certain of its existence. “ I know that the world I converse with in the city and in the farms, is not the world I think. One day, I shall know the value and law of this discrepancy. But I have found that not much was gained by manipular attempts to realize the

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world of thought," Emerson writes. (284) The first sentence may be interpreted in two ways; first, that the world Emerson sees is not what it appears to be; second, that Emerson's inner world, or "world of thought", is a separate imaginative sphere which stands apart from worldly forms. Through his use of a dual meaning, Emerson points out his reader's own inability to perceive the meaning of reality. However, the remainder of his statement seems to affirm that he intends the latter interpretation: a separate imaginative world, distinct from the illusory outer forms, remains in Emerson's mind, although the entirety of its depths remain inaccessible to him.

The redeeming aspect of Emerson's closing paragraph is its reliance on faith. While Emerson does display a sudden optimism which overlooks his earlier claims of worldly enslavement, he makes no statements that fundamentally contradict his earlier philosophy. Because Emerson writes from the realm of illusion, as he admits in the paragraph's opening sentence, he himself cannot know whether or not his perception is correct. Therefore, he must operate on faith, given his knowledge of reality and illusion as he understands it. He can trust, with the same certainty, that knowledge will be revealed to him; he prompts his reader — or, perhaps, himself — to stand up again, and to look forward to the transformation of the world. Emerson's hopeful conclusion, therefore, transcends the suppositions of the intellect. While his previous reasoning suggested that illusion cannot be overcome, he places his faith in the emergence of a reality which cannot yet be known.