



CAN TRANSCENDENCE BE TAUGHT?

John Kaag and Clancy Martin

Part 2 of 2

Post-Kantian philosophy, the type that Goethe helped to generate in the early years of the 19th century, was defined by its dissatisfaction with, among other things, the conceptual remove of Kant's critical project, the sense that it had lost touch with the lived experience of life and action. Kant's philosophy was supposed to be about freedom and human autonomy, but his books were regarded, even in his day, as dry and lifeless. They were "correct" as far as they went, but for thinkers working in his wake, they didn't go nearly far enough. Kant was missing the felt sense of human meaning.

On the evening that John's grandfather Paul let his grandson hear him talk about love and see him cry, he also shared a story that had been pointedly redacted from his family history. He'd grown up in

Altoona, Pa., a coal-mining town that, even in the 1920s, was beginning to run aground. He'd fallen in love with a young woman named Hope, John's grandmother, from an even more dilapidated community called Alison 1, a "patch town" owned by the Rainey coal-and-coke company of Uniontown. Hope and Paul came from families that were close-knit—so close that they never fully rejoiced at the prospect of marrying off their children. So under cover of night, the two of them eloped to Maryland, and then made for New York City. At one point in the distant past, Paul had known the thrill of experience, a sense of love and freedom that made life oh so worth living, but over the course of middle age it had been tempered, or tamped down, by life's practicalities. And only in his final days was Paul willing or able to return to those forbidden sentiments.

Goethe and his contemporaries, like Schiller, would have regarded this as tragic and instructive in equal parts. They called their readers to an "education of the sentiments," which quickly became a touchstone for educators of the 19th century. It was probably drawn from Adam Smith and his theory of moral sentiments, and reshaped by the Romantic poets, who held that a particular orientation among experience, emotion, and nature was key to being fully human.

The sentiments, or subjective feelings, were necessary for the educated person to motivate and sustain ethical relations and to develop one's own fully human capacities. One could read, write, and speak about freedom, but to actually be free one had to thrill with the sheer possibility and then allow this sense to determine one's actions. The education of the sentiments had little to do with book learning and everything to do with the lessons of human experience, the ways in which it can be lastingly satisfying.

This is what Faust craves most: to experience everything. Or better yet, to learn how human experience, transitory and fragile, could come to mean, if not everything, at least not nothing. It is tempting to think that Faust desires an infinite range of experience—to traverse its full horizon—but we suspect that what he yearns for is depth and height, a strange experiential quality that can occasionally pervade a fully human life.

If philosophy of the 17th century was defined by the "epistemological turn"—the desire, bordering on obsession, to define the nature of objective truth—writers in the 19th century witnessed what might be called the "experiential turn," a continuing attempt to explore the subjective inside intellectual life. That culminated, of

course, in the movement we call Existentialism.

Goethe's demand to concentrate on, and enrich, experience was echoed by American transcendentalists of the 1830s, and was well fitted to a nation that lacked longstanding tradition but brimmed with opportunity and possibility. For Emerson, Goethe was "the Writer," who, "coming into an over-civilized time and country, when original talent was oppressed under the load of books and mechanical auxiliaries and the distracting variety of claims, taught men how to dispose of this mountainous miscellany and make it subservient." But subservient to what? For Goethe, the answer was complicated.

His prioritization of experience over the traditional life of the mind was premised on a deeper commitment to reshaping culture (*Bildung*), and to the belief that ideas, on their own, without the corresponding sentiments, could do pitifully little to transform a society. Goethe may have helped to initiate the experiential turn, but to the extent that sentimental education remained instrumental, hinged tightly to societal reform, the revolution had yet to be fulfilled, Emerson thought. Goethe's "is not even the devotion to pure truth," the American wrote, "but to truth for the sake of culture." And this orientation, one that elevated culture writ large over the cultivation of individuals, kept Goethe from, in Emerson's words, "worshipping the highest unity; he is incapable of a self-surrender to the moral sentiment."

"The need to have authentically lived and also to know what to do about dying are knotted together in a way that none of our usual intellectual approaches can adequately untangle."

Emerson would not make a similar mistake. He published his essay, "Experience," in 1844. It opens by revisiting the despair, frustration, and confusion that Faust expressed 40 years earlier. But this existential crisis, unlike Faust's, was not the stuff of fiction, and it wasn't expressed only to be overcome in the grand movement of *Bildung*. Emerson's son Waldo had died two years earlier. The boy had contracted scarlet fever at the age of 5 and succumbed in a matter of days. "I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition," Emerson wrote. Unhandsome, indeed. For all of its uncertainty and transience, experience assured Emerson of one thing: It would be over all too soon. This is perhaps the hardest, but also the most profound, lesson of experience, and one that many people learn in the

twilight of life. The trick, if we understand it, is to learn before it's too late.

“Experience,” what became a seminal essay in the American philosophical canon, was articulated not in order to be employed by the grand movement of culture, but to refocus on the subjective sense of the most pressing of human problems. Emerson wrote:

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?

Historically scholars have skirted, if not explicitly fled, that question, retreating to the traditions, institutions, systems, and norms that seem to give some sort of ballast to an otherwise precarious existence. But that has been a flight from experience, a type of transcendence that amounts to a monumental feat of escapism. After the death of Waldo, however, flight was not an option for Emerson. Experience: It's a noun, it's a verb, but ultimately, for a host of scholars in the 19th century, it was an inescapable command. Experience—all of it. “It is not length of life,” Emerson instructs, “but depth of life.”

When one tries to sound the depths, Emerson concludes that it is possible to listen for a quiet inner voice that never, even in our darkest or most ecstatic moments, forsakes us, a voice that says, “Up again, old heart.” This perseverance in the midst of experience, rather than any transcendental dreams for cultural revival, was at the heart of classical American philosophy's education of the sentiments. It was, at all points, geared toward what Emerson's young friend Henry David Thoreau would call improving “the nick of time.” Each nick, each critical moment, singular and always present, can, for the time being, be occupied and improved. Thoreau went to Walden not as a demonstration of some environmentalist agenda but to “live deep and suck out all the marrow of life,” to cut, to mark, with pressure and precision, the time he'd been allotted.

America of the early 19th century was routinely pigeonholed by European thinkers as having a climate wholly uncongenial to philosophers. But that wasn't exactly true. It was uncongenial to a certain type of abstract thinker, and some Europeans began to acknowledge American philosophers' exploration of the relationship between action and thought in a way that might allow one to face longstanding existential dilemmas. Emerson, Nietzsche wrote,

is “a good friend and someone who has cheered me up even in dark times: He possesses ... so many possibilities, that with him even virtue becomes spiritual.”

The Romantic impulse ran deep with both thinkers: Experience was life-affirming not in the abstract but in the emotional and intellectual tenor of an individual. Philosophy at its best was to be learned by rote—not in the sense of mindless memorization but in the sense of learning something by heart. And this most personal of knowledge was meant to give individuals the courage to determine their own lives and to ask a question that Nietzsche voices in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “What is the greatest experience you can have?” How deeply or gently or subtly will you make your nick of time?

Those questions seem to have no place in academe. Is that because the experiential turn has run its course? Or has it been only temporarily interrupted?

The question of “the greatest experience” should be one that we resuscitate in our colleges. Lessons, both narrow and grand, on drawing the marrow from life are, when you think about it, the most crucial and timeless of all, to the self-seeking late teen and the purpose-seeking nonagenarian alike.

At 81, John’s grandfather, Paul, wanted to see the Grand Tetons one last time and asked John to chaperone the outing. The whole family thought it was ludicrous: an old man with a mechanical hip hiking through the woods. They were right. The elderly fellow went “ass over tincups,” in his words, and had to be taken to the emergency room (a fact that didn’t at the time get back to his hand-wringing daughters). At 85 he wanted to ride a bike again, despite not being able to get his leg over the crossbar, and again enlisted the family philosopher as an accomplice. Another secret trip to the emergency room. A year later he wanted to talk about love, despite having assiduously avoided the word for most of his life. This time, something more notable than the emergency room: tears.

“We should do this again,” he said, after he dried his eyes.

There was something about the quality of the experience, despite its difficulty, that continued to beckon.

So what exactly is the allure of experience? Thoreau gives us a hint: “You must live in the present, launch yourself on every wave, find your eternity in each moment. Fools stand on their island of opportunities and look toward another land. There is no other land;

there is no other life but this.” That might sound as if he were endorsing a shallow form of hedonism, but we don’t think so. Experience is undergone and absorbed subjectively, in the present—that is to say, in the same register as Faust’s most personal of existential questions. Death might be one’s ownmost possibility, but so is experience. Plumbing the depths of experience allows one to own up to life—to say this life was, for better and for worse, “my own.”

In his final months, Paul forgot everything—his keys, his grandson, his name—everything. But one morning, a few weeks before his death, he remembered falling off his bike. “*I*,” he paused to catch his breath, emphasize the word, and press on, “did that,” he said grinning.

He articulated part of the draw of experience: It is, at every moment, personally felt, a marker of a life lived, if not with grand purpose, at least with authenticity. The ancient philosophical imperative to “know thyself” would be impossible to satisfy without keying into experience. At the brink of the 20th century, William James, who inherited Emerson’s transcendentalism and refashioned it in his American pragmatism, claimed that it was “the zest” of experience that helped make life significant.


There is a type of Promethean self-reliance implied in this discussion of experience, a willingness to live in the moment and claim “no other life but this.” But there is another aspect of experience that takes us beyond the confines of modern subjectivity and guards against the charge of solipsism that has often been leveled against the experiential turn. Thoreau’s direction is “to find your eternity in each moment.” The “your” is important, but so to, and equally, is the “eternity.”

The “your” and the “eternity.” There’s the intersection where you’ll find a grandfather’s quest for deep experience and a mother’s appeal for guidance toward some kind of transcendent perspective in the face of mortality. As loving children, and as philosophers, we feel the urgent call for meaningful answers.

The need to have authentically lived and also to know what to do about dying are knotted together in a way that none of our usual intellectual approaches can adequately untangle. It is related to the strange way that experience is both wholly one’s own and never fully in one’s possession. Experience is, by its very nature, transcendent—it points beyond itself, and it is had and undergone with others.

So how could John's grandfather have reconciled himself with death, and how can Clancy's mom prepare for it? How can we grapple and help our students grapple with it? Surely it couldn't come down to a simple reading list; a well-planned course; a humble, fundamental step back to view the why and wherefore of our knowledge and its conveyance.

Then again, none of that could hurt. It must be part of our jobs, as college teachers, to launch our students on the search for something larger than their immediate concerns, to confront them with the challenges that are presented by such intractable questions as the meaning of suffering, life, and death. "One never goes so far as when one doesn't know where one is going," Goethe wrote elsewhere, and that's a big hint. The elusiveness of knowing about life and death might be the point. Like falling in love, or even like remembering riding a bike, thinking about death might be the willingness to embrace what is unknown, what is unknowable. The cheerfulness displayed by that old skeptic Socrates in the face of death is apt for one wise enough to admit that he's never known anything about the most important matters.

Faust's despair is not a consequence of the limitations of his knowledge but the frustration of a mistaken attitude. Yes, in the face of life and death, all that knowledge amounts to nothing. Of course it does. The meaning of life and death is not something we will ever know. They are rather places we are willing or unwilling to go. To feel them, moment by moment, to the end, authentically, thoughtfully, passionately—that is an answer in itself. And for us as educators, to show our students the importance of trying to go to those places—that may be one of the best things we can teach them. 

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THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

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