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Abstract

The Transcendentalist movement in America (1820s – 1840s) was associated primarily with the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, the naturalist and political theorist Henry David Thoreau and feminist theorist Margaret Fuller. In contrast to the empiricists and rationalists, the Transcendentalists doubted knowledge gained from earlier sense-experience, logic and reason. They claimed that intuition or personal revelation should be the source of knowledge and truth. Philosophical tradition claimed that we could rely on the fact that the nature of our experiences and reality could be described linguistically. Indeed, for Plato, The Forms could be discovered through philosophical analysis.

Transcendentalism changed this focus. Today, in America, Transcendentalism no longer appears to remain as a specific doctrine but is felt to be foundational to many movements which continue to oppose the dominant culture. It is believed that Thoreau's writings both shaped the civil rights movement through passive resistance and the underpinning ideas of the modern-day ecology movement.

This dissertation will begin by exploring the main ideas of the Transcendentalist movement focussing specifically on the writings of Emerson and Thoreau. Both of whom acknowledged the importance, beauty and inherent goodness of nature, leading to Thoreau living for a year by Walden pond: a year spent living simply and with intention.

American Transcendentalism became the cornerstone of environmental and conservationist movements through its art and literature showing nature with its wild and untamed landscapes and in that sense is not too dissimilar to the British and German Romanticism movements. The Transcendentalists were also very active socially in supporting the abolition of slavery, the emancipation of women and the resistance to immoral and unjust government actions.

Exploration of the moral and environmental obligations we have to ourselves and to others will provide the foundation for considering if and how Transcendentalism remains relevant today.

Henry David Thoreau in particular considers the importance of transcendental experience. Those experiences which are ineffable; unable to be captured in words but which have a transcendent quality. These experiences are important to living a good life and can be found even in the most mundane of everyday tasks. In a world where, it could be argued, we live average lives consisting mainly of working and shopping; accruing material goods in a global world; a data driven world; a world suffused with politics and social media, and 'fake news', perhaps we are losing the ability to engage in transcendental experiences. Indeed, do we know what they are.

This will form the main focus of my research: I will claim that human beings have a disconnect to nature and the environment and my main argument will be to investigate if this disengagement is due to a lack of these transcendent human experiences. Furthermore, if we were able to experience this particular category of human experience would any obligation to act responsibly towards the environment be more motivating. The research will be undertaken employing a thematic commentary as I believe this to be the most appropriate methodology for the chosen subject matter. A further thematic analysis of the findings will inform my closing remarks.

The role of moral and environmental obligation and transcendental experiences in American Transcendentalism and in addressing climate change.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Henry David Thoreau's life was broadly uneventful. He was born in Concord, Massachusetts on July 12th, 1817. His father, John, was a manufacturer of pencils and his mother, Cynthia was apparently known for her strong opinions on anti-slavery. She was a member of the Concord Women's Anti-Slavery Society which was aligned with the well-known radical Boston abolitionist William Garrison.¹ Thoreau had three siblings, a brother John and two sisters.

Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson (who was 14 years his senior) met in late 1837 and they became close friends. Both Thoreau and Emerson along with Margaret Fuller were foundational to the Transcendentalist movement. Thoreau considered Emerson to be a teacher and intellectual adviser and according to Cain (2018) perhaps also a father figure. In 1841 Thoreau became a member of the Emerson household attending to tasks such as gardening, household repairs and tutoring the Emerson children. Thoreau was an avid reader and he engaged regularly in the writing of the Greek and Roman classics and English poetry, paying special attention to the English Romantics, Wordsworth, and Coleridge.

Thoreau's brother John died in his arms in 1842 from an infected wound caused by shaving and Thoreau never married. In 1845 Thoreau began building his cabin near Walden Pond in Concord. The cabin was built by Thoreau on land owned by Emerson, and he describes the pond in *Walden* as a 'clear and deep green well, half a mile long and a mile and three quarters in circumference and contains about sixty-one and a half acres: a perennial spring in the midst of pine and oak woods, without any visible inlet or outlet except by the clouds and evaporation' (Walden, 175).

¹ Born in Massachusetts in 1805, Garrison was a reformer who worked for women's right to vote, civil rights, and prohibition but is well-known for his fierce and uncompromising opposition to slavery. In October 1835, he was tied up and dragged through the streets of Boston with the threat of being lynched for his antislavery views. His preference was for non-violence and the moral persuasion of slaveholders. He died in 1873. See [William Lloyd Garrison - NATIONAL ABOLITION HALL OF FAME AND MUSEUM](#)

This description of the area surrounding Walden Pond would give the impression of an area rich in forest but according to Higgins (2017), Thoreau's life overlapped with the apex of deforestation in New England, and it is reported that Concord was largely bereft of its trees by 1850.

Alongside the destruction of the forests, it is important to note that the railroad was also making an incursion into the local landscape. A powerful expression of the technological transformation of America. Despite being impressed by its ingenuity and power, Thoreau hated the effects of the railroad on the landscape and its promotion of commercialism, and his belief was that it undermined personal freedom.

Thoreau lived at Walden Pond for just over two years in a cabin that measured 10 feet by 15 feet and the impression we have is that it was a solitary existence where Thoreau sought to live simply. However, this was not the case, he lived simply but he had visitors, he walked into town, and he ate with Emerson and his family.

Not unlike his mother, Thoreau also had links with the anti-slavery movement during the 1850s and with an abolitionist called John Brown. Brown was captured, tried, and executed for leading an assault in October 1859 on the federal arsenal, Harpers Ferry in Virginia.

According to Cain (2018), Thoreau honoured John Brown as a 'moral champion who gave his life for his principles'.²

Thoreau died in 1862 in Concord from tuberculosis. He was 44 years old and at his death he was recorded as a natural historian.

Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism was a complex response to the fundamental issues of the time – the democratisation of American life, industrialism and the rising prominence of science and new technology that were starting to impact upon and change people's lives. Warren,

² However, it is also reported that Brown's actions reflected the violence at the time and a reaction to what he felt was the legalised criminality of slavery. Thoreau and Emerson helped to establish Brown as a martyr in the North whilst applauding his sacrifice they also overlooked his violence, and he became a heroic symbol of the abolitionist movement. Consequently, the Southern states saw the Harpers Ferry raid as a direct attack and this in turn led to an increasing distrust between the North and Southern states ending in secession in 1861. See [The Abolitionist's John Brown | American Battlefield Trust \(battlefields.org\)](https://battlefields.org)

Brooks and Lewis (2016) further suggest that Transcendentalism represented the revolt of the young in society, but that it also had its roots in ancient Greek philosophy. Thoreau turned to reading Plato, Aristotle, Xenophon, and Thales during the 1840s. He also engaged in reading Indian Philosophy, notably the *Laws of Menu* and the *Vishnu Purana*.³ *Walden* is an expression of Thoreau's independence from his previous life and along with that declaration it records an intimacy with nature. Goodman (2015) suggests that it is a phenomenological investigation of basic forms of human life such as sitting, eating, walking, and sleeping. To Thoreau, philosophy was to be seen in practical terms and as a way of life. His readings of the Greek and Indian philosophers supported this view. Philosophy as a way of life is a feature of Plato and Aristotle thought. Plato in the *Republic* considers what things are necessary to life: food, shelter, and clothing and then a division and specialisation of labour to encourage and take advantage of different talents. Thoreau also sees food, clothing and shelter as essential elements and explores the advantages and consequences of the division of labour. However, there is one difference between Plato and Thoreau and that is the role of nature within Thoreau's Romanticism. Natural locations are the settings for Thoreau's thinking and nature is the ultimate teacher. Nature teaches by its beauty but also its wildness and this is supported by the Harivansa's claim that an 'abode without birds is like a meat without seasoning.'⁴

Imagination sits between spirit and nature and for Aristotle it was a link between sensation and thought – thoughts occurring due to sensations and images. This fits nicely with Platonic Idealism whereby reality exists beyond the appearances of the world. The link between Transcendentalism and ancient Greek philosophy is further asserted by Emerson when he stated his belief that 'Plato is philosophy and philosophy is Plato'.⁵ Transcendentalism suggests that the physical world, no matter how observable and concrete it may seem, is simply an appearance and that the mind is the conduit for the world's phenomena. 'All that you call the world is the shadow of that substance which you are, the perpetual creations of the power of thought'.⁶ This is a reminder of Plato's allegory of the cave that he explores in

³ Cited in Richardson, *Henry Thoreau*, 78-82.

⁴ Cited in Thoreau, *Walden*, 85.

⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson (2016). "Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson - Plato, or the philosopher", p.2, Editoria Dracaena

⁶ The Transcendentalist." Masonic Temple, Boston. Jan. 1842. Lecture. Emerson: Essays and Poems. Ed. Library of America College. New York: Library of America, 1996. 191-209. Print.

The Republic. Plato encourages people not to be content with just what they can see which are merely illusions, but they are told to find out what lies beyond these.

Emerson called Transcendentalism a reaction 'against the too formal science, religion and social life of the earlier period.'⁷ The 'formal science' referred to by Emerson, was linked directly to the Enlightenment and the empiricists John Locke and David Hume who had dominated the eighteenth century. It was also though a reaction to the continued development of science in the nineteenth century.

Transcendentalism sought to address and redefine man's relationship to nature and the world around him.

Brodrick (n.d) describes Transcendentalism by explaining how the 'world of facts and the categories of common sense are temporarily exchanged for the world of ideas and the categories of imagination.' Brodrick further explains that time, space, and causation (which he terms 'common sense categories') relate to events that take place within our human experience and therefore constrain us. He gives the examples of unavoidable outcomes in life which are made certain by causation and how space can physically separate us from places we would rather be or with people we want to be with. In contrast, he states that the world of ideas and imagination releases us from worldly constraints to a place where 'physical space is no more than an idea'.⁸

The Transcendentalists believed that the world is an expression of spirit or mind and is inherently good. This, combined with Immanuel Kant's ideas of the spontaneity of the human mind; his belief that imagination was foundational to the human mind and the British and German Romantics who promoted the importance of a sense of wonder and amazement, the antirationalist movement and the ascendance of the primacy of the individual are all characteristics of the Transcendentalist viewpoint. Idealism can also be identified as a central feature of Transcendentalist thought. Emerson in his writing *The Transcendentalist* stresses a philosophy which is influenced by Immanuel Kant's theory of cognition, the idea of *a priori* knowledge that could be grasped intuitively. A direct and

⁷ See [Emerson - HISTORIC NOTES OF LIFE AND LETTERS \(vcu.edu\)](#)

⁸ See The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Available at: [American Transcendentalism | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy \(utm.edu\)](#) Accessed: 25/11/2022

opposing contrast to the empiricist philosophy of John Locke's idea of the mind as a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, and his view that all knowledge must be verified by the senses.

The assumption of *a priori* knowledge therefore leads to individualism and the principle of self-reliance promoted by Thoreau and Emerson. In Emerson's essay *Self-Reliance*, he promotes self-trust and the independence of the individual. Transcendentalism insisted on the value of self-reliance and individuality. They believed that societal constraints forced individuals to conform to norms and conventions which resulted in a corruption of individual potential and purity. However, it is a misconception to suggest that the Transcendentalists shunned society and that when Thoreau left to live at Walden Pond that he was separating himself out of society and away from people. Instead, he believed it was better to be self-dependent and to live a simpler life.

Emerson also believes in the superiority of Reason. He says that by listening to your own inner voice you can follow your own intuition and Reason and as a result of this traditional 'authorities' such as history, science and religion lose their power to guide and teach. This is evidenced by Thoreau's ideas in *Civil Disobedience* and that whilst he was living at Walden, he made a decision about his relationship to the government. Rather than supporting the war with Mexico and the extension of slavery in America, he made a conscious decision to refuse to pay his taxes to the state, leading to his spending time in jail. He was further annoyed when an anonymous benefactor paid his fine, thus releasing him from jail. Thoreau urged those around him to examine their consciences and change their behaviour. This confirms the view that Thoreau was very much a 'man of action' whereas Emerson, in contrast, was viewed as the 'man of ideas' believing that nature itself is the supreme model and ultimate ground of morality. Individuals, therefore, are the ultimate moral agents because they gain access through Reason and contemplation to the moral laws in nature.

Some have suggested that Transcendentalism was a religious enthusiasm and revolution. The majority of those who were described as Transcendentalists were previously involved with Unitarianism and they spoke of an ordered universe in which you could progress by doing good works whilst also living within a benevolent environment. The lived quality of your life would then be considered on judgement day. Emerson became highly critical of the

Unitarians in what he saw as an arid and remote church. However, there is a strong spiritual thread that runs throughout Transcendentalism. The main point of the Transcendentalists was that all partake of divinity; divinity is within humankind and within nature and that all divinity is perceivable by each person who lives life in a way that is in harmony with spirit.

According to Martin (2013) there are 5 main characteristics of Transcendentalism:

- Everything is a reflection of God
- A person's true feelings and intuition are more valuable than book knowledge
- Contemplating nature can allow you to transcend the real world
- A person's instinct can lead them to understand God's spirit

A great focus of Thoreau's *Walden* is a profound appreciation of nature and the perception of nature as being a source of divinity and mystical inspiration.

On March 5th, 1853, Thoreau, 'upon receiving a letter from the Association of the Advancement of Science asking him what branch of service he was especially interested in, wrote in his journal that he couldn't properly answer, for the Association did not 'believe in a science which deals with the higher laws.' He was, he affirmed, 'a mystic, a Transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher.'⁹

Transcendentalism and Romanticism

Transcendentalism and Romanticism share many key features. Romanticism which is also known as Romantic Ecology¹⁰ developed from individuals, primarily literary writers who resisted the radical, anthropocentric, and mechanistic worldview during the 1800s. Writers such as William Wordsworth (1770-1850), Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), Walt Whitman (1819-1892) and John Muir (1838-1914) promoted an Arcadian alternative to the industrial landscape of Europe and America. In England,

⁹ See Warren, Brooks and Lewis, 2016 p. 14.

¹⁰ See Keller & Golley, 2000

Wordsworth praised the sublime quality of his native Lake District. In America, Thoreau had begun 'to regard man as an inhabitant, or part and parcel of nature, rather than a member of society'.¹¹ In contrast to Plato's anthropocentrism summed up in Socrates' declaration to Phaedrus: 'I'm a lover of learning, and trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in the town do' (1982: 479, 230d), Walt Whitman extolled the epistemic and spiritual value of nature and John Muir who was a pantheist, considered nature God'¹²

In 1832 Emerson visited England as part of a tour around Europe and met with the poets Wordsworth and Coleridge. It is reported that Wordsworth was a supporter of the French Revolution but became concerned by its consequences.¹³ As a result, he 'sought pleasure in nature, its power to heal and its relationship with human beings'.¹⁴

The poems of Wordsworth have been analysed by Seamon approaching them from a phenomenological perspective. He concluded that heightened emotional feelings were connected to a profound sense of belonging to nature and that these created a deep sense of inner peace which was hard to explain rationally and best understood by being experienced.¹⁵ Like the Transcendentalists, Wordsworth believed that humans are a part of nature and this can be witnessed in his poems whereby he seeks to show deep connections between humans and nature. Both Wordsworth and Emerson believed that there was an integration, a communion between humans and nature. Despite being from different parts of the world, Emerson and Wordsworth believed similar ideologies. They promoted the rights of the common people and they reacted against intellectual realism, objective reasoning, mechanism, and arid religion.

Science and religion both promoted the view of universal mechanism; that the material world is one big, amazing machine and is reducible to mechanical principles such as the motion and collision of matter. This metaphysical view of mechanism denies that nature has

¹¹ *Walden* 1980 :93.

¹² See Keller & Golley, 2000: p.5.

¹³ See Dickinson 216:1974 where he states that Wordsworth was frustrated by 'the blood of the aged, the innocent, of the defenceless sex, of the ministers of religion, and of the faithful adherents of a fallen monarch'.

¹⁴ Sen, R. (2016). EXPLORATION OF IDENTICAL IDEAS: WORDSWORTH AND EMERSON. SARJANA.

¹⁵ Seamon, D. (1984). Emotional experience of the environment. *Am. Behav. Sci.* 27, 757–770. doi: 10.1177/000276484027006007

any teleological direction, value or indeed, purpose but continues to exist in line with the deterministic laws of physics.¹⁶

This view alongside that of the religious view of ‘fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth (Genesis 1:28) led to the subjugation of nature during the Industrial Revolution. People saw nature as a resource, and this is summed up well by Locke (1992) when he says that people believe that nature has no value in and of itself but acquires value according to its use by humankind.

The Romantics and Transcendentalists believed that this devaluation of nature ultimately led to the separation of human beings from their connection with nature, and furthermore that industrialisation and its mechanisation led to the perception that nature was dull but for Wordsworth, Thoreau, Muir, Emerson and Whitman, nature was awe-inspiring.

Transcendental Experiences

The term ‘awe’ is significant as we seek to understand transcendental experiences. Research has examined the effects of awe and how it impacts on an individual.¹⁷ Asplund, (2019) describes transcendental experiences as ‘heightened experiences where one may experience the absence of self-consciousness and self-judgment, a loss or extended sense of time and space, harmony with the natural world, absence of pain, suffering and weakness, a profound sense of love, a resonance with wholeness and relief from dichotomous thinking, a surrender of will, a sense of vastness or connection with the cosmos, and a relief from the human condition’.¹⁸

Bonner and Friedmann (2011) state that ‘awe lacks a consensual and precise meaning’ (p.222). However, researchers agree that it is a sublime emotion as a consequence of having an experience which overwhelms the self and human understanding, and which can provoke a devotional reaction.

¹⁶ There is also anthropic mechanism – everything about human beings can be explained in mechanical terms.

¹⁷ Van Elk et al., 2016, Rudd et al., 2012, and Piff et al., 2015. Research has evidenced how the importance of individual self is reduced alongside the increase in prosocial behaviour. Some research has also associated it with the Ancient Greek term of Eudaimonia. All the research connects the feeling of awe to nature – mountains, forests, beach, rivers, sea, and valleys.

¹⁸ Asplund, 2019 p. 22.

The research undertaken by Bethelmy and Corraliza (2019) – see *Fig. 1* further connects awe and sublime emotion to be an experience evoked by the natural world. Their study aimed to establish an instrument which could, in some way, measure transcendent emotions including what might constitute awe.¹⁹ Maslow (1964) suggests that awe is associated with impulses towards honesty and goodness.

Term	Definition	Author/s
Sublime emotion	Emotion characterised by astonishment, awe, fear, respect and admiration. Feeling a mix of terror and pleasure that becomes a “delightful horror” if no real danger is perceived. Stimuli that trigger it include natural and non-natural places with particular features and properties, qualities of human frailty, the infinite, eternity, and certain works of art. This is distinct from “beauty.” The sort of feeling that stirs the soul, whether due to surprise, terror, reverence, magnificence, trembling, or respect. Kant added certain personal characteristics to the sublime stimuli earlier proposed by Burke.	Edmund Burke (1757) Immanuel Kant (1764)
Sublime emotion towards nature	Experiencing fear and pleasure in a wilderness perceived as powerful. In a mix of awe, humility, self-transcendence, joy, sadness, enthusiasm, and connection with the whole universe. This is produced by “horrid” landscapes as well as superhuman dimensions like eternity, infinity, and the ineffable.	Bodei (2008)
Self-transcendence	Peak experience. A larger-than-life experience of self-realisation characterised by a mix of spiritual emotions like enlightenment, awe, reverence, humility, happiness, wonder, and connection to the universe, among others. Flow experience. Achieving harmony and balance in consciousness by engaging in creativity and focused on attention on process of authentic personal growth. This entails deep enjoyment of life and attainment of happiness.	Maslow (1964) Csikszentmihalyi (2014)
Feeling of awe	An emotional experience characterised by fear, vulnerability, humility, disorientation, inspiration, and renewal; and in contrast, sensing a higher power, beauty, and justice, among other things. A mix of emotional states – epiphany, joy, mortal fear, vitality, humility, vulnerability, respect, and a sensing a connection of all nature – elicited by nature’s mystery, power, savagery, and unpredictability,	Keltner & Haidt (2003) Shiota et al. (2007) Cousins et al. (2009)

¹⁹ According to Bethelmy and Corraliza, sublime emotion is described as a transcendent, spiritual emotion comprising of awe and positive, pleasurable emotions.

Fig.1: Summary of Basic Content Referenced about Sublime and Transcendent Emotion (Bethelmy & Corraliza, 2019)

Transcendentalism and Self-transcendence

At its core self-transcendence relates to transcending or rising above the self and relating to that which is greater than the self. It is the recognition and realisation that we are a small part of a far larger whole.

Self-transcendence is often considered to be the more neglected aspect of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs where he placed self-actualisation as the pinnacle of human development and growth. It wasn't until he was approaching his own death that he added in the notion of self-transcendence and placed it above self-actualisation.

Of self-transcendence he wrote:

'Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos'.²⁰

For Maslow, self-transcendence gives humans what he called 'peak experiences' whereby we transcend our own personal worries and perceive things from a higher perspective. These peak experiences are thought to provide us with positive emotions such as joy, peace and a greater sense of self-awareness. It is hard to deny the likeness between self-transcendent peak experiences and the Transcendentalist experience of nature.

Reed has developed a Self-Transcendence Theory whereby she explains how self-transcendence creates a multidimensional expansion of our 'self-conceptual boundaries'.²¹ She argues that our boundaries are expanded inwardly through our internal experiences, outwardly through our engagements and contacts with others and temporally where the past and future become integrated into the present. Interestingly though she also adds in

²⁰ Maslow, 1971, p. 269

²¹ Self-conceptual boundaries being those elements that make us who we are, defines us and what constitutes our identity.

another expansion that of, transpersonal expansion in which the 'individual connects with dimensions beyond the typically discernible world'.²²

The consequences of these expanded boundaries put individuals, she states, in a state of greater connectedness with their environment. She further suggests that older adults are more likely to have a higher self-transcendence than younger adults and this has been supported by research conducted by Ellermann and Reed in 2001. Her research also suggests that with self-transcendence comes an increase in moral concern with a greater focus on doing what is right.

The introduction has given an overview of Transcendentalism and the key principles and ideas that underpin the Transcendentalist movement. This lays an important foundation for the ongoing exploration of transcendentalist thought and how or whether Transcendentalism remains useful as a movement for supporting action on climate change. The following chapter will explore the method and methodology connected to this study.

²² Reed, 2003.

CHAPTER ONE: METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter will outline the methodology of a literature review which will support research into the main aims of this study. The philosophical assumptions will be outlined, and this will be carried out taking the position that the concept of reality is socially constructed, and in order to explore the research question, a qualitative approach to research will be implemented.

Researcher Voice

For objectivity within the research process, the author needs to establish a voice and determine a rationale for wanting to complete the study. For the purposes of the literature review, the position of the author acknowledges the need to be reflexive and understands that perceptions and interpretations of the literature is dependent upon the experiences of the author.²³ The author acknowledges and recognises that she has not directly experienced a situation that could be described as transcendental but has read many accounts from individuals who have had such experiences. This alongside an interest in American Transcendentalism led to curiosity as to whether transcendental experiences could be harnessed to motivate concern and more importantly proactive behaviours that would nurture and care for the planet.

The Research Design

Nicholas et al (2011) indicates that method selection can be a difficult process. It is important to note that there are different types of methodology, such as the use of qualitative, quantitative, and epidemiological research. This research however will use qualitative methodology through the implementation of a literature review. Studies of this

²³ Fook & Gardener, 2007.

nature are smaller in scale, which can make knowledge more insightful and meaningful, however, it can make generalising the research findings difficult.²⁴

Furthermore, data collection under this research paradigm can be lengthy and time consuming, and open to the interpretation of the researcher, highlighting the subjectivity of the literature based on the researcher's experiences.²⁵ Braun and Clarke (2013) consider this further, with suggestions that concepts of reality are based purely upon a "human way of knowing about it".²⁶ This alludes to suggestions that knowledge that is acquired is only ever as good as the interpretation of that knowledge.

Philosophical Assumptions

Qualitative research is underpinned by ontological assumptions, meaning reality and knowledge are based upon notions of interpretation.²⁷ Phenomenology underpins the research, as it anticipates the collection of rich and thorough information. Qualitative research is subjective and interpretative in nature and relies on the study of phenomena to uncover perceptions of the world. Due to the subjective nature of researcher interpretation during the research process, researcher bias could be an issue. Ensuring researcher reflexivity during the process will help to mitigate this.²⁸

The theoretical origins of Ontological research and Social Theory Phenomenology originate from the work of Husserl.²⁹ The concept of Social Theory Phenomenology is based around the ideas of constructivism which stems from the fundamental basis that the social world is constructed through shared attitudes and values within social interactions.³⁰ It is from these social interactions that people are able to create a sense of shared truths.³¹ When research is described as phenomenological, this indicates that the researcher wishes to reveal the significance that individuals place on a phenomenon, through their shared truths,

²⁴ Ryan et al, 2007; Bryman, 2016; Aveyard, 2019.

²⁵ Rychetnik et al, 2002; Moore, 2014.

²⁶ Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 27.

²⁷ Furlong, 2013.

²⁸ Pringle et al, 2011.

²⁹ Cerbone, 2014.

³⁰ Matthew and Ross, 2010.

³¹ Saunders et al, 2019

phenomenology therefore aims to gather honest and multifaceted descriptions of phenomena as they exist.³²

Research Aims

1. The exploration of moral and environmental obligation in the American philosophical Transcendentalism movement.
2. To assess and analyse the notion of transcendental experiences as a conduit for the exercise of environmental obligations.
3. The Transcendentalist approach to the current challenges of climate change.

Method

Justification for Literature Review

A literature review is the comprehensive study and interpretation of literature specifically relating to the study area and research aims. With a literature review, a question is answered through the comprehensive reading of literature and using a systematic approach to draw out a cohesive argument.

Following steps methodically in order to extrapolate data from literature from a number of sources, will aid in answering the research question. Ensuring that each stage of the literature review has been documented, will ensure the soundness of data. However, criticisms of using a literature review comprise of a lack of transparency within the research process, and a lack of rigour alongside using a small amount of literature to deduce findings, which could make it difficult to generalise the findings of the research.³³ Whilst it would have been extremely useful to have engaged in a direct qualitative approach such as people interviews and narratives around transcendental experiences, it was not possible to deliver

³² Finlay, 2013.

³³ Jesson et al, 2011.

the amount of time needed for this. As a result, a literature review was undertaken which did uncover research studies completed around individual's transcendental experiences.

Literature Search

The search for the literature for this research was carried out using the following database searches: Academic Search Complete, ProQuest, SAGE journals online and Google Scholar. These databases have been selected due to their access to journals and publications within the field of American Philosophy, Transcendentalism and Environmental Philosophy. These are fields suitable for retrieving appropriate articles and relevant for forming the foundations of the research study. Filters were applied to the searches to include articles and journals that were available with full text online, were peer reviewed and spanned several specific time frames.³⁴

Keywords were applied to the search engine to include, 'American Philosophical Transcendentalism', 'Thoreau', 'Emerson', 'Walden', 'American Romanticism', 'Transcendentalism', 'Moral Obligation in Transcendentalism', 'Transcendentalism and Environmentalism', 'Transcendental Experiences', 'Transcendental Experiences in Nature and 'American Environmentalism' (please see Appendix 1).

Once articles had been sourced, the abstract was previewed and the resource either saved for review or discounted. Articles were gathered from the UK and internationally and in particular, America. Additional to resources gained online, books and multi-media sources within the domain of American Philosophical Transcendentalism and Environmental Philosophy were also used based on their relevance to the research topic. For each chapter, further searches were undertaken to streamline further the available literature in order to ensure all efforts had been made to find applicable literature for review. A small number of papers and research studies were found that had good connection to the research topic and details of these can be found in Appendix 2. These provided a foundation to the later chapters of this research paper.

³⁴ In particular studies and research articles written within the last 30 years.

Search terms	Results	Comments
American Philosophical Transcendentalism	5,070,000	General overview – no environmental movement as such.
Thoreau, Walden	2,830.000	
Emerson	199,000,000	
Moral Obligation in Transcendentalism	1,620,000	Virtue ethics related primarily. Focus on them being against the humanisation of nature.
Transcendental Experiences	151,120	Often aligned to transcendental phenomenological studies of people with lived experience.
Transcendental Experiences in Nature	130,241	Linked with or aligned to self-actualisation leading to direct action.
Transcendentalism and the environment	11,701	Human progress being an assault on nature
Transcendentalism	3,090,000	Also contains religious experiences.

Data Extraction Table

Source	Study Aim	Participants/sample size	Method	Findings
Asplund, 2019	Author used a heuristic phenomenological approach to understand transcendental experiences within nature.	9 adults – 5 women and 4 men of varying ages.	Unstructured interview	5 themes presented themselves following the interviews with the participants – relationship with nature, the Divine, spiritual growth, simplicity of experience and playfulness. The study reinforces the importance of the nature/human relationship and the benefits of such. Evidenced aspects of personal growth from the experiences.
Bethelmy & Corraliza, 2019	Aim was to create a valid, reliable instrument with which to measure sublime emotion towards nature.	280 members of public of Madrid – 55.2% women/44.8% men. Aged 17 -77 years and from both urban and rural areas.	Self-report surveys administered by interviewers.	'We can conclude that sublime emotion toward nature is a kind of transcendence, but not all transcendent experiences are sublime feelings toward nature'

Summary

This chapter has outlined the method of a Literature Review which is underpinned by the Ontological Theoretical basis of Social Theory Phenomenology under the paradigm of

qualitative research. This chapter has helped to outline the importance of the awareness of the Researcher Voice within the research process, which helps to offer a justification for the selection of the research topic and offers a contribution to the wider corpus of American and Environmental Philosophy research.

The next chapter will focus on the moral and environmental obligations within American Transcendentalism considering the values that underpin Transcendentalism.

CHAPTER TWO:

Moral and environmental obligation in American Transcendentalism

'in the woods we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, - no disgrace, no calamity which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, - my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, - all egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal being circulate through me; I am a part or particle of God.' (Emerson, 1836)

This chapter will focus on the ideas, characters, personalities, and dispositions of individuals who are prominent in Transcendentalism and environmental concern. In any discussion or exploration of moral and environmental obligation, it is important to reflect on the character traits that we ought and ought not to have as they can provide evaluative concepts and perspectives that support our ability to understand and subsequently respond to environmental concerns. This area of moral philosophy is called virtue ethics and in it we can explore those traits that are called virtues and vices. This contrasts with, normative

theories that might directly link right actions to outcomes or fulfilling duties and rights, such as consequentialism and deontology.

A moral obligation is the requirement to pursue an action that we believe to be right and to adapt or change our behaviour to support that action. Obligations stem from various sources – our relationships and promises we might make to each other, agreements, debts of gratitude and professional codes or practices connected to our roles. It follows then that environmental obligation is being aware of what is right and reasonable behaviour in the sustenance and development of nature and the environment.

Xu (2021) discusses how the current world view of anthropocentrism, the idea that humans are the only ones that have intrinsic value and therefore all other entities have value based on their role in serving the needs of humans, supports the view that we have no moral obligation to nature or the environment. This is a significant contrast to Ecocentrism which considers that humans have a moral obligation to the whole of nature. However, both anthropocentrism and ecocentrism suggest a relationship of duality between nature and human beings, a continued separation.

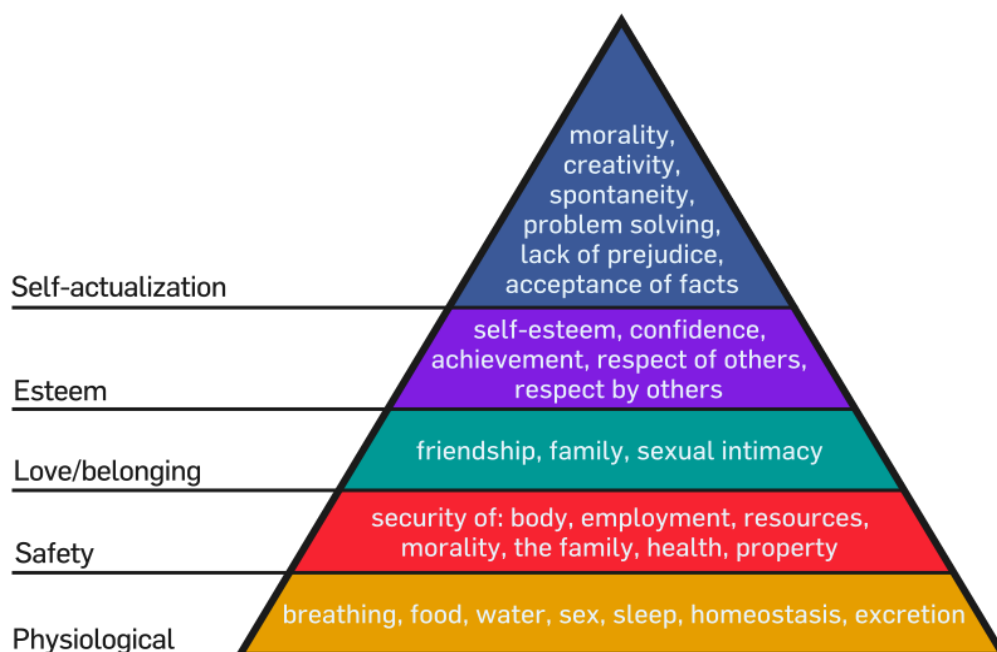
For the Transcendentalists, the world is not seen to contain duality, two separate and distinct parts (human and nature) but all beings are seen to contain and be contained by others. As Xu states, 'human beings are not placed above or outside nature, but within nature'.³⁵ This means that nature becomes an extension to the self and the needs and interests of self and nature are inseparable. Through this relational experience, the Transcendentalists believed you could experience a direct relationship with the divine that would enhance their spiritual lives.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote a great deal on nature, and he was primarily concerned with what he called the transcendent self and its potential to commune with a transcendent divinity lying beyond natural phenomena. Emerson sought to see the world around him as a

³⁵ Xu, 2021 p.3.

collection of images or pictures and to take pleasure in the goodness of moral action and to contemplate beauty.³⁶

Some 90 or so years after Emerson's death ³⁷, Abraham Maslow (1908-1970), an American psychologist developed his idea of what supported the optimum in psychological health. Maslow created his Hierarchy of Needs which states that a person requires basic needs such as food, shelter, water, and safety as a minimum for survival. Then as a person develops, they require the need to belong and to love and be loved; and finally, to have a sense of self-esteem that comes through success and competence. After these needs have been fulfilled, the cognitive needs and ideas of an individual need to be supported and the individual can explore beauty at an aesthetic level. Maslow called this self-actualisation.³⁸



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (courtesy of Wikimedia Commons).

³⁶ Brodrick, n.d.

³⁷ Emerson died on the 27th of April 1882.

³⁸ Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is most often represented by a pyramid with basic level needs at the bottom and self-actualisation at the top.

However, Maslow amended this model towards the end of his life and added an even higher development than self-actualisation, that of self-transcendence. About self-transcendence he stated:

‘Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos’.³⁹

As modern ethical philosophy argues for altruism, ancient ethical philosophy has its roots in an enlightened self-interest. Today’s ethicist may seek to answer what our duties and obligations are to others and what we can expect from them whereas the ancient philosophers sought the answer to what constitutes a good life and how can we go about living it.

Ancient Greek philosophy conceived of virtue as personal excellence, recovering an ethical space for the pursuit of excellence, and recovering a broad account of virtue that acknowledges the full spectrum of human interests and activities. Others have explored virtue ethics due to the perceived failure of other approaches to justify our moral duties or, in contrast, those other approaches may have demanded too much of us to warrant moral action.⁴⁰

Thomas Hill (1983) uses the term ‘character ethics’ which represents the idea that environmental activities often have features that are not fully able to be captured by consequentialist or deontological evaluation. Sandler (2018) gives an example of a person who chooses to cut down a wooded area and concrete over it just because of the perceived hassle of having to maintain it. This view aligns itself to the current rise in the use of ‘fake grass’ or creating patios or decking to replace grassed areas. Hill believes that the language or concept of utility or of rights cannot fully express what he feels is disturbing behaviour. He believes that the question to be asked in such examples is, “What sort of person would destroy the natural environment – or even see its value solely in cost/benefit terms?”⁴¹

³⁹ Maslow, (1971) *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*. New York, p.269.

⁴⁰ Cafaro, 2004.

⁴¹ Sandler, 2018, p. 1,

This is a question which is directly related to an individual's character, their motives, and intentions and what they value. A question that neither deontology or utilitarianism can appreciate or fully answer. It suggests an absence of those traits in an individual which we might agree are fundamental to the protection and nurturing of our environment; traits such as humility, gratitude and a sensitivity to other living things may support those reasons to promote the love of nature.

Sandler (2018), states that for Thoreau, temperance, and simplicity 'are conducive to happiness because they foster an uncluttered life and mind' .⁴² This is thought to assist an individual in being able to focus on those things which have real and lasting value. We might consider justice, honesty, loyalty, nature, and beauty to be those things that have some form of inherent and intrinsic value and that we look for in our lives and in those we meet. Cafaro (2004) suggests that the terms Emerson uses in his writings confirms that he was a virtue ethicist – 'heroism', 'nobility', 'being a man' and 'a great soul', Cafaro claims that these are not the terms currently used in modern ethical debates that focus on defining rights and justifying egalitarianism.

For Emerson, duties and responsibilities are around self-cultivation and a general enrichment of a nation's culture which he separates into personal and social duties respectively. These duties bring a challenge and Emerson warns us that living a life that is truly one's own involves 'burdens of solitude, uncertainty and the hard work of thought.' ⁴³ Both Thoreau and Emerson emphasised a life of aesthetic appreciation, artistic creation, personal expression, and a diversity of experience and these underpinned their ethics.

The appointment of Andrew Jackson as president in 1828 marked a period of democracy in America commonly referred to by Fish (1927) as 'the rise of the common man.' No longer were the only choices those of being fortunate enough to have been born into the aristocracy versus the unfortunate one of being born into a life in the lower class from which escape was impossible. Now, Middle-classness was achievable through hard work and reliance on the self.

⁴² Ibid p.222

⁴³ Emerson, *Oxford Authors*, 51-52

This social development also contributed to the economic changes taking place in America from a subsistence to a market economy. People were able to sell their produce and use the money to pay for other items they wanted or needed instead of having to grow or make what was needed for survival. The idea of supply and demand added a monetary value to produce supplied and this replaced individual craftsmanship resulting in people becoming disengaged from their surroundings. Instead of thinking about the amount of time needed to create something, they started to think about how much time was required to work in order to make enough money to buy the item. Thoreau makes this point in *Walden*, where he contrasts someone putting in a hard day's labour in order to buy a ticket for a short rail journey, with his own leisurely pace on foot towards the same destination. He was able to interact with nature and people on the way. For Thoreau, "the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life, which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run".⁴⁴

Money was becoming a more important representation or standard of personal worth than an individual's moral conduct. By opposing the Lockean view and embracing the Kantian intuitive, moral idealistic path, the Transcendentalists hoped to demonstrate the interconnectedness of their moral and intellectual outlook.

A gradual extension of the scope of moral consideration starting in the 1800s beyond Immanuel Kant's kingdom of ends, which was reserved for humans only, to include first other sentient creatures and then nonhuman life forms more inclusively, helped instigate modern animal protection, animal rights movements, and endangered species and wildlife habitat laws.⁴⁵

Emerson along with Frederick Henry Edge (1805-1890) and George Ripley (1802-1880) founded a discussion group called Hedge's Club in 1836. The purpose of the group was to engage in discussions around philosophy and theology. Frederick Henry Edge was a Unitarian pastor who had studied in Germany and was reportedly well-versed in German philosophy and in particular the ideas and writings of Immanuel Kant. It is believed that

⁴⁴ *Walden*, pp. 53, 31

⁴⁵ Burrell, cited in Parham and Westling, 2017.

Emerson came to know Kant's transcendental philosophy through Hedge and their discussions within the group.

Malpas (1999) states, "to have a sense of oneself...is...to have a sense of place." This is in direct contrast to Neil Evernden who calls humans "the natural alien," a species without fixed habitat and a natural home range (pp. 103 -124). He suggests therefore that what makes humans unique is our ability to be detached and disconnected from any physical setting, place, or territory. This surely has implications for our ability to show concern for our environments and the wider planet, the more detached we become, the less we are concerned about its deterioration.

Ulrich Beck, who is famous for the term 'risk society' relating to our current age of advanced technological modernisation, states that 'only if nature is brought into people's everyday images, into the stories they tell, can its beauty and its suffering finally be seen and focussed on.' (p.14)

It can be argued that there is the creation of a new diminished assumption in society of what a natural environment should be and what it looks like. Reflecting on my childhood days and remembering the large number of ladybirds and fuzzy caterpillars that used to adorn the plants (especially Tansy) and how people often now remark on how few there seem to be. For more recent generations, this is not the case, they were not around when ladybirds were profuse and so this inevitably changes the assumptions that people have of what a lived experience of nature should be like and reinforces the idea that the more modernised a society the less natural it becomes. Some authors have termed this 'nature deficit disorder'.⁴⁶

Louv (2005)⁴⁷ author of *Last Child in the Woods* suggests that young people and adults are at risk from nature-deficit disorder (NDD) due to elements of our lifestyle which in combination decrease or eliminate our contact with nature. He cites fewer natural spaces, a car-focused culture, increased screen time, changes in the perception of risk from strangers, less leisure time and increased work or school pressures as elements leading to stress, depression, and greater susceptibility to cardiovascular disease. However, NDD is not

⁴⁶ Warber et al., 2015

⁴⁷ Louv R. *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. Chapel Hill, NC, USA: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill; 2005

considered to be a formal clinical diagnosis but a way of describing the cognitive, psychological, and physiological consequences or costs of being alienated from the perceived restorative aspects of nature. Louv's theory around NDD has received some criticism. There appears to be little evidence in his book, *Last Child in the Woods* to support his theory but nonetheless, his writings appear to 'ring true' or have some resonance with people. Some argue that the perception of NDD is caused more by our romantic nostalgic longing for our own childhoods of the past but also questions how much of it is that nature has a calming effect or is it that in open rural spaces adults are more accepting of children being children.

Warber et al (2015), discusses how the growth in rapid urbanisation is a cause for concern especially in young people. She reports that this leads to less frequent interactions with the natural world and subsequently that has a direct impact on well-being as well as a number of other chronic health issues. She undertook research with a number of young adults who were attending a wilderness camp and found that the wilderness environment encouraged and supported social connections, improved relaxation, reduced stress and gave a sense of wholeness and transcendence. What is also notable is that the research confirmed other studies that found that a love and care for nature translated into positive environmental behaviour.⁴⁸ It perhaps follows then that we can start to develop the link between transcendental experiences, environmental concern and behaviour which works towards mitigating our destruction of the planet.

Burrell discusses two challenges to affect the environment and any progress that can be made towards protection and restoration. The first he calls a 'problem of amnesia' or 'environmental generational amnesia' and the other a 'problem of overstretch' (p.411). It is, therefore, perhaps understandable why people live their lives as if the physical environment were an inexhaustible resource amenable to human control and sufficient for the needs of a constantly expanding human population. Alongside this view of Anthropocene environmental memory is Burrell's other consideration, the crisis of overstretch. This is a term which relates to our thinking about the Earth's age and how this affects our actions and behaviours in relation to environmental

⁴⁸ Perkins, 2010

problems. Biblical authority, for instance which underpinned Anglo-European Protestantism dated the Garden of Eden at less than six thousand years ago. Developments within the field of geology disputed this but it is only since the late twentieth century that it is recognised and accepted that there have been numerous mass extinctions and it is only since the early 1900s that the earth is proven to be billions of years old. It is hard to grasp multi-billion-year planetary time and attempts to do so have given rise to geological clocks for plotting evolution, but it fails to give ideas about what humans are to do about it and may indeed create a further sense of detachment towards personal responsibility and obligation.

The philosopher Slavoj Žižek remarks, "I once maintained that apocalypse was environmental rhetoric's most potent weapon. I have since changed my mind. Partly that is because ecoapocalypse-talk has become banalized, but chiefly because it does not match either the facts on the ground of humankind's failure to internalize the sense of inhabiting evolutionary time." (p.328)

In his book, *The Immense Journey*, anthropologist Loren Eiseley states that there is something wrong with the human world view. He says, "we see farther backward into time than any race before us, but we stop at the present, or ... project, far into the future idealized versions of ourselves, not realising that we're only one of so many appearances of the thing called Life." (pp. 7, 57, 59)

Two highly significant individuals within American environmentalism, Aldo Leopold (1886-1948) and Rachel Carson (1907-1964) were scientists, but they moved into the realm of social commentary and debate.

Carson argued that human beings have a misguided belief that they can somehow control nature and that the use of pesticides was an example of this anthropocentric idea. The control of nature, she said was a 'phase conceived in arrogance...when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man...It is our alarming misfortune that so primitive a science has armed itself with the most modern and terrible weapons, and that in turning them against the insects it has also turned them against the earth' (1994: 297). Alongside Carson's view, Leopold was also arguing that moral considerability should be expanded to include the land as a whole and not just excluded human groups such as women and minority ethnic groups.

Both Carson and Leopold helped to create a wider flourishing variety of environmental ethics such as those of Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher. Ideas which he termed 'Deep Ecology', the belief that our individualistic egoistic selves are inextricably linked to a larger biospherical self and that the environmental ills that modernism has created comes from a failure or a denial to recognise this relationship (Keller & Golley, 2000: 6).

CHAPTER THREE:

Transcendentalism and the environment

'I come to my solitary woodland walk as the homesick go home... It is as if I always met in those places some grand, serene, immortal, infinitely encouraging, though invisible, companion, and walked with him.' (Thoreau, diary entry January 1857).

Although not recognised as a Transcendentalist, the Japanese farmer and philosopher, Masunobu Fukuoka (1913-2008) developed a method of farming commonly referred to as 'natural farming' or the 'do-nothing farming' method. Following a particularly difficult period in his life, Fukuoka came to the realisation that all human knowledge is empty; that all human action is meaningless, and that nothingness is the fundamental nature of reality. This realisation made Fukuoka approach his life differently and he resisted the urge to impose his interventions onto the natural world around him.

His philosophy of life suggests that the problems we encounter in the world are caused by human intervention and that by intervening in nature we disrupt the natural balance of all things. We then seek to correct this imbalance by intervening further and so it goes on.

What interests me about Fukuoka is what he believes to be the reason for why human beings are so focussed in, intervening in nature and the environment. He explores in his writings what he calls the most 'epoch-making' discoveries that have influenced human thought and development, Darwin's theory of biological evolution, Newton's theory of gravity and Galileo's heliocentric theory and lastly Einstein's theory of relativity.

Fukuoka considers how Darwin's theory of evolution has led to the idea that human beings must continue to develop, a sense of continual progression which is ingrained throughout our experiences and in many ways underpins all the choices and decisions that we make in life. What Fukuoka is suggesting here is that the foundation of human knowledge has been received through human intellect and that this is an illusion. These pioneers of the scientific community have promoted the idea that it is acceptable to control nature using human will and as a result nature and the environment are seen in opposition to humanity.

Fukuoka talks about how as children our knowledge becomes discriminatory at an early age, 'when a child first becomes aware of the moon, that child is simply filled with wonder. Then after a period of time the child learns to discriminate between a subject, 'I', and an object 'the moon.' The child comes to know the thing called the moon as 'other.' (p.21) So, Fukuoka says, even in our language we are taught to set ourselves apart from nature and our relationship once experienced as a child through amazement and excitement becomes cold and distant. Once we have a mental image of an object, it inevitably takes concrete form and leads to us wanting to know more about the object. Knowledge leads to a desire for more knowledge, and we lose sight of the true essence of the object that we experienced as a child.

In *The Dragonfly Will Be the Messiah* (2021), Fukuoka describes what we might consider as a transcendental experience, he writes:

'The peaceful beauty of the world became vividly apparent to me. I was overcome with emotion and reduced to trembling. I had been foolishly searching for something when it had

been there, right in front of me, all this time. The sparkle of the morning dew, the green of the trees bathed in morning sunlight, the delightful chatter of birds gathered in the dawn...what a wonder it was that I, too, was able to take my place in this realm of freedom, this world of ecstasy. I saw nature directly. It was pure and radiant, what I imagined heaven to be.' (p.2)

He continues by saying that in a single leaf and a single flower he could appreciate all the beautiful forms of the world and I am reminded of William Blake's *Auguries of Innocence* where he writes, 'to see a World in a Grain of Sand and a Heaven in a Wild Flower Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand and Eternity in an hour...'⁴⁹

Many of us may not have had this intensity of experience witnessed by Blake and Fukuoka, but we might have had similar experiences when we have felt connected to nature and the environment around us. It is also clear, and Fukuoka says as much, that these experiences don't happen very often and when they do, they fade quickly.

Whether we call these experiences transcendental or sublime, they appear to be defined by several emotions – joy, vitality, awe, calm but also sadness, fear, respect, reverence and sometimes shock or uneasiness and vulnerability.⁵⁰ Edmund Burke writes in his 1757 essay on 'the sublime and the beautiful' that these emotions are activated by experiencing the feeling of subjugation to something greater than oneself such as nature.

William James, another American philosopher more noted for his important contributions to psychology adds that these experiences often triggered by nature are present within works of art and in particular the poetry of Walt Whitman. He states that his poetry conveys feelings of interconnectedness between the personal and the universe (James, 1902).

Returning to Maslow and his belief in the possibility of self-transcendence, he states that those who achieve self-transcendence often have peak experiences, in which the individual transcends the ego. What develops is a oneness with the wider universe. In such states

⁴⁹ *Auguries of Innocence* by William Blake, 1950.

⁵⁰ Bodei (2008) talks about how these emotions are often connected to the uneasiness that people feel when they are faced with concepts that they find difficult to understand such as death, the infinite and the vastness seeming void of space.

(mystical, emotional or aesthetic) it is believed the individual experiences intense peace, well-being, joy and an awareness of the ultimate truth and connectedness of all things.⁵¹

Is there evidence though that Thoreau experienced self-transcendence or peak experiences. We can gain some insight into his life whilst living at Walden Pond. In his *Journals*, he writes: 'If with closed ears and eyes I consult consciousness for a moment, immediately are all walls and barriers dissipated, earth rolls from under me, and I float . . . in the midst of an unknown and infinite sea, or else heave and swell like a vast ocean of thought, without rock or headland, where are all riddles solved, all straight lines making there their two ends to meet, eternity and space gambolling familiarly through my depths. I am from the beginning, knowing no end, no aim. No sun illumines me, for I dissolve all lesser lights in my own intenser and steadier light. I am a restful kernel in the magazine of the universe. . . . Men are constantly dinging in my ears their fair theories and plausible solutions of the universe, but ever there is no help, and I return again to my shoreless, islandless ocean.'⁵²

And again,

To be calm, to be serene! There is the calmness of the lake when there is not a breath of wind. . . . So it is with us. Sometimes we are clarified and calmed healthily, as we never were before in our lives, not by an opiate, but by some unconscious obedience to the all-just laws, so that we become like a still lake of purest crystal and without an effort our depths are revealed to ourselves. All the world goes by us and is reflected in our deeps. Such clarity!⁵³

Trees held a significant importance for Thoreau. He considered them to be 'wordless prayers and benedictions for the art of being' (Popova, 2022). Being in their presence gave Thoreau a contrast, a counterpoint to what he felt were the falsehoods in society.

⁵¹ Maslow also talked about plateau experiences which are longer lasting and appear to be serene cognitive states. He said that in plateau experiences not only does the individual feel joy but also sadness from the realisation that others do not have similar experiences.

⁵² *The Selected Journals of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Carl Bode (New York: New American Library, Signet Classics, 1960), 39-39.

⁵³ *Henry David Thoreau: A Writer's Journal*, ed. Carl Bode (New York: Dover, 1960), 38-39

Emerson also sought out transcendental experiences within nature, often taking long walks under the stars or sitting beneath pine trees. During one evening when Thoreau and Emerson went rowing together, Emerson writes:

‘Then the good river-god has taken the form of my valiant Henry Thoreau here & introduced me to the riches of his shadowy starlit, moonlit stream, a lovely new world lying as close & yet as unknown to this vulgar trite one of streets & shops as death to life or poetry to prose. Through one field only we went to the boat & then left all time, all science, all history behind us and entered into Nature with one stroke of a paddle...But on us sitting darkling or sparkling there in the boat, presently rose the moon, she cleared the clouds & sat in her triumph so maidenly & yet so queenly, so modest yet so strong, that I wonder not that she ever represents the Feminine to men. There is no envy, no interference in nature. The beauty & sovereignty of the moon, the stars, or the trees do not envy: they know how to make it all their own. As we sail swiftly along, & so cause the moon to go now pure through her amber vault & now through masses of shade & now half hid through the plumes of an oak or a pine, each moment, each aspect is sufficient & perfect.’⁵⁴

Robert Richardson in his biography of Emerson explores this passage and suggests how it has several qualities which we would recognise as being connected to transcendental states including the sense of being outside of time.

Uebersax (2021), in his article on *Emerson’s and Thoreau’s Shared Mystical Experience*, laments at how unfortunate it is that Maslow did not refer more often to Thoreau or Emerson’s experiences. He supposes that this is possibly because in the 1950s and 1960s when Maslow was writing, the Transcendentalists were ‘out of vogue’.⁵⁵ However, just from these passages alone we can witness rich experiences having taken place for both Emerson and Thoreau. Is it possible though to make a direct link with having transcendental or sublime experiences to an increase in environmental altruism?

Self-transcendent values are those which operate outside the individual and are concerned with the welfare of others, or the environment or natural world. In contrast self-

⁵⁴ Emerson, Ralph Waldo. [Nature](#). In: *Essays. 2nd Series. The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Vol. 3. Ed. Edward Waldo Emerson. Houghton Mifflin, 1903; pp. 172–174.

⁵⁵ [Emerson’s and Thoreau’s Shared Mystical Experience | Satyagraha \(wordpress.com\)](#)

enhancement values are focussed on goals that promote an individual's own interests. Schwartz (1992) equated self-transcendence with an openness to change, new experiences and development and self-enhancement with conservatism and a focus on social stability and tradition.⁵⁶ Our personal values are foundational to the attitudes and concerns we have about the environment and can be directed therefore towards ourselves, other people or the environment and all living creatures. It follows that our attitudes towards the environment and its difficulties can be described as being egoistic, social or biospheric.⁵⁷

Dominicis, Schultz and Bonaiuto (2017) discuss how pro-environmental behaviours can be separated into two distinct types, notably those with a self-transcendent or biospheric foundation and those with a self-enhancing or egoistic foundation. They argue that unlike self-interested individuals, altruistic individuals engage in pro-environmental behaviours when there are both environmental benefits and personal benefits. This leads them to state that altruism is also inclusive of self-interest. This becomes even more useful if climate change, for example is seen as a social dilemma. Social dilemmas are situations whereby the interests of the individual conflict with the interests of a collective. If an individual pursues their own self-interest, it can often be to the detriment of the collective. Again, Dominicis et al utilising three experiments (laboratory and field) conclude that a 'self-enhancing message motivates both self-interested and altruistic individuals towards environmental actions.⁵⁸ They conclude their research by suggesting that highlighting self-enhancing reasons for engaging in pro-environmental behaviours would motivate a larger audience before then moving to a self-transcendent value-based communication and that this would propel global behavioural change by encompassing a wider audience of values and actions.

⁵⁶ See Schwartz, S. H. (1992). Universals in the content and structure of values: theoretical advances and empirical tests in 20 countries. *Adv. Exp. Soc. Psychol.* 25, 1–65. doi: 10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60281-6

⁵⁷ See Stern, P. C., and Dietz, T. (1994). The value basis of environmental concern. *J. Soc. Issues* 50, 65–84. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-4560.1994.tb02420.x

⁵⁸ De Dominicis Stefano, Schultz P. Wesley, Bonaiuto Marino (2017) Protecting the Environment for Self-interested Reasons: Altruism Is Not the Only Pathway to Sustainability. *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol 8. www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01065
DOI=10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01065

American Transcendentalism can inform the debate around climate change and globalisation. It is argued by Wolfel⁵⁹ that global capitalism and globalisation developed as a rejection of the values embodied by American Transcendentalism as a modern reincarnation of immaterial and idealist Platonism. Transcendentalism with its focus on the renunciation of economic and materialistic consumption and its embrace of nature and experience as a means of gaining greater wellbeing. Wolfel further states that the global Covid-19 pandemic provides 'evidence for the diminishing returns that are inherent to the hegemonic commitment to materialistic economy at the expense of the corresponding devaluation of commitments to the ideals of Transcendentalism'.⁶⁰

Indeed, Emerson recognised those diminishing returns when he asserted that the impact of Transcendentalism would be greater and last longer than that of materialism in his era.

More recent criticism of Transcendentalism during the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is what is perceived as the inconsistencies between what is professed and what is actually done in practice. In particular Schulz in her article 'Pond Scum'⁶¹ explores the reasons why there is an overwhelmingly positive public perception of Thoreau's *Walden* when she herself judges it to be the 'journal of a blatant fraud'. Schultz believes that Thoreau's credibility is threatened by what she sees as his selfishness and righteousness, the impracticality of his recommendations and his inconsistency. Her ire is peaked most at what she calls his most insufferable claim, that 'the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation'.⁶² Interestingly this is one of Thoreau's sayings which is most often quoted as being meaningful to people after reading *Walden*. For Schulz she questions how a man who appeared so disinclined to get to know others could allege a claim about the rest of humanity. As I have previously stated, it is a misconception to read *Walden* as Thoreau's attempt to live a solitary life. He was never misleading as to the fact that Walden Pond was only a short distance away from Concord and the point of him living there was less to do with being remote as to more about feeling remote.

⁵⁹ Brian Wolfel; American Transcendentalism and the Twenty-First Century. *Utopian Studies* 1 July 2022; 33 (2): 291–316. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5325/utopianstudies.33.2.0291>

⁶⁰ *ibid*

⁶¹ *The New Yorker*, 19th October 2015.

⁶² *Walden*, 7

The relationship between Transcendentalism and our global difficulties – of which climate change, biodiversity extinction and degradation of ecosystems are some aspects – deserves more exploration given the timeless ideals of the Transcendentalist movement. Capitalism places economic growth as the main global focus whilst human interaction and engagement with nature and the environment is far below.

Scientists have concluded that over the past two decades concentrations of carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide and chlorofluorocarbons has increased in the atmosphere. Human activities related to industrialisation and development, including deforestation and the burning of fossil fuels have contributed to this acceleration. Consequences amount to a change in rainfall and weather patterns across the world, a rise in sea levels, disruption and destruction of marine ecosystems, the extinction of plant and animal species and an increase in environmental refugees.⁶³ The most significant development in climate politics to have occurred over the past three decades is the signing of the Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1992 and subsequent agreements made at the Conferences of the Parties (COP) now in its 27th year with COP27 having very recently taken place. These initiatives seek to bring together world leaders to commit to protecting ‘the climate system for the benefit of present and future generations of humankind, on the basis of equality and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capacities’.⁶⁴ However, despite positive intentions little effort has gone into the implementation of agreements and there continues to be significant controversy and disagreement which positions industry development and expansion against environmentalism, rich against poor and believer against sceptic.

Transcendentalists highlight the underlying values, ethics, actions and practices that underpin and support environmental problems. Over consumption of both food and products, intensive farming methods and increased global construction as well as global warming is placed within a context of a crisis around human values and ethics. Fundamentally, this crisis separates individuals from nature, the environment and non-

⁶³ Chichilnisky and Heal, 1993; Turekian, 1996

⁶⁴ Article 111, UN Framework Convention on Global Climate Change.

human species. Transcendentalists would seek therefore to change the discourse or narrative from thinking about specific action and policy to that of exploring what values and ethics underlie the climate discourse. Problems that we are encountering are a result of the difference between the way humans think and the way nature works.

One of those changes to the discourse around climate change could be about normalising attitudes towards the environment and promoting behaviours which will support eco-friendliness. Pro-environmental behaviours are seen as being niche and are often connected with the actions of groups such as Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil. These organisations employ direct tactics to disrupt people's lives with the aim of creating a new narrative and discourse and positioning unsustainable behaviours as unusual or wrong. Being described as 'normal' can have a powerful effect on our behaviour and often without us realising it. There has been an increase in recycling⁶⁵ which is more than likely due to the advertising which surrounds it. It has become normalised; a positive behaviour that encourages us to engage in greater green behaviours.

However, it also appears that normalisation can have the opposite effect. A study completed by Moore from the University of California, sought to examine whether normalising extreme weather dulls global warming concerns.⁶⁶ They utilised the social media App Twitter, between March 2014 and November 2016 to study and evaluate people's perceptions and found that people base their perceptions of normal weather patterns on a 2 – 8 year time frame. This was seen as a short-time span which can distort the realities of climate change. Moore says, 'the risk is that if you're forgetting what happened before 8 years ago, then you are never really going to be able to put the weather you experience into a longer-term context that really describes the overall effects of climate change'.

The researchers became increasingly concerned about what they called the 'boiling frog' effect whereby we accept as normal a gradually more hostile environment rather than

⁶⁵ In 2009/10, 40% of household waste in the UK was recycled, composted or reused. In 2020 (the most recent figure) it was 44.4%. The Office for National Statistics. Available here: [UK statistics on waste - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk). Accessed: 6/12/2022.

⁶⁶ [Rapidly declining remarkability of temperature anomalies may obscure public perception of climate change | PNAS](#)

choosing to do something about it. It is thought that if people really knew what was happening and could see it, they would avoid the consequences and do something. The more often weather conditions such as extreme heat or freezing conditions occurred, the fewer the number of people would post about them. This suggested to the researchers that these events had become normalised for people.

As we have seen Transcendentalists believe in a natural world which is fragile, interconnected and at risk and as Addams and Proops state, 'humans live in a closed ecological system whose carrying capacity has been, or is about to be, exceeded and which must be defended from the worst impulses of the human race. Indeed, the human species and human development priorities are the real threat to environmental security'.⁶⁷

Transcendentalists would be committed to transforming the political, economic and social landscape through fundamental changes to our value systems. Changing the way we think and behave seeing it as a moral obligation to address climate change. With our current ecological emergency exploration is needed to determine to what extent the environmental and climate crisis is considered to be a problem about values and ethics and the role that Transcendentalism can play in remedying that problem.

Conclusion

What I saw when I looked back at my fragile home – a glistening, inviting beacon, delicate blue and white, a tiny outpost suspended in the black infinity. Earth is to be treasured and nurtured, something precious that must endure (Collins, 1980, p. 6)

The Transcendentalists believed that nature was and is our greatest teacher and that their way of thinking and living would promote sustainability. Henry David Thoreau could be seen to be one of the first advocates for living a sustainable lifestyle, revealing the peace and serenity that comes by living simply and deliberately. He demonstrated that we could live with and in nature instead of continuously harvesting its natural resources to our own benefit and its detriment.

⁶⁷ Social discourse and environmental policy: an application of Q methodology – Addams and Proops p.79

The act of consumption contains something both assertive and confrontational. There is always the use of something which often leads to its non-existence or destruction such as eating. Our appetites tie us to things and impedes independence and justice. Thoreau denounced injustice and chafed under a loss of independence. Reading Thoreau, he often seems to want to get beyond appetite and this is evidenced in the passage from *Wild Fruits*: 'when I see, as now, in climbing one of our hills, huckleberry and blueberry bushes bent to the ground with fruit. I think of them as fruits fit to grow on the most Olympian or heaven pointing hills...you eat these berries in the dry pastures where they grow not to gratify an appetite, but as simply and as naturally as thoughts come into your mind, as if they were the food of thought, dry as itself'.⁶⁸

Disciplining our physical desires and appetites is part of Thoreau's philosophy and one which is difficult to replicate globally. Curbing our desires is thought to further our higher goals such as self-transcendence and being able to engage in transcendental experiences may well support that ideal. Limiting our appetites and desires can be good for us but seeking to eliminate them altogether is unrealistic. Thoreau's life embodies the former but can sometimes appear to move towards the latter and this risks 'devaluing the existing world, in a fruitless and unnecessary quest for purity'⁶⁹ and self-sufficiency.

The aims of this research were to:

1. Explore moral and environmental obligation in the American philosophical Transcendentalism movement.
2. Assess and analyse the notion of transcendental experiences as a conduit for the exercise of environmental obligations.
3. Consider the Transcendentalist approach to the current challenges of climate change.

⁶⁸ Thoreau, *Wild Fruits*, 52-53.

⁶⁹ Cafaro, 2004. p. 247

We have seen that the American Transcendentalist movement believed that there was a moral and environmental obligation to the life they led and to the world in which they inhabited. This view was underpinned by the ideas and writings from both Ancient Greek and Indian Philosophy and the desire to reduce the impact and prominence of 'self'. We have heard how many commentators agree that Thoreau's ethical position were focussed on aspiration, looking back at the Ancient philosophies, and looking forward to contemporary virtue ethics. The idea of moral obligation is important to virtue ethics – indeed foundational to it. Thoreau question's peoples ideas of their duties whilst calling upon the power of the concept of moral duty to emphasise their importance. Thoreau believes that we have an obligation to cultivate virtue and make the most of our lives.

The studies chosen to highlight both the importance and usefulness of transcendental experiences in developing positive environmental behaviours has been explored. I would have liked to have found more evidence of the direct link between sublime experiences and self-transcendence in changing behaviours towards a more positive protection of the planet and non-human species but there is no doubt that there is a link to be observed. It remains therefore my contention that the more we see ourselves as part of nature and truly believe that to be the case (with or without the additional experiences), the more we are motivated to protect and care for it. It has further consolidated my belief that human beings are separated from nature and that the ongoing narrative to 'live in harmony' with nature is not enough and could even be detrimental. I acknowledge, however that a change in narrative and perception on a global scale is unlikely, but we should continue to try.

Lastly, we have seen that Transcendentalist ideology is important within the current debates around climate change and that again a change in perception is needed to include deeper questions and debates about values and the kind of human beings we are and not just the practical aspects of encouraging people to buy less and recycle more. To look at ourselves and question our consumptions, appetites and desires, whilst uncomfortable is what is required. Afterall, 'what use is a house if you haven't got a tolerable planet to put it on?'⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Thoreau [1860], 1906, p. 360

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Appendix 1 : Data Extraction Table

Source	Study Aim	Participants/sample size	Method	Findings
Asplund, 2019	Author used a heuristic phenomenological approach to understand transcendental experiences within nature.	9 adults – 5 women and 4 men of varying ages.	Unstructured interview	5 themes presented themselves following the interviews with the participants – relationship with nature, the Divine, spiritual growth, simplicity of experience and playfulness. The study reinforces the importance of the nature/human relationship and the benefits of such. Evidenced aspects of personal growth from the experiences.
Bethelmy & Corraliza, 2019	Aim was to create a valid, reliable instrument with which to measure sublime emotion towards nature.	280 members of public of Madrid – 55.2% women/44.8% men. Aged 17 -77 years and from both urban and rural areas.	Self-report surveys administered by interviewers.	'We can conclude that sublime emotion toward nature is a kind of transcendence, but not all transcendent experiences are sublime feelings toward nature'

