

EMERSON ON SELF-RELIANCE

Pre-reading: At the risk of contradiction, read the introduction to Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance." This essay was a source of inspiration to Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche used a similar theme in his book, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, which is not a following of Schopenhauer's philosophy but a tribute to the man's originality and conviction. There, Nietzsche uses the metaphor of realizing one's daimon or 'genius' (in ancient Greece, one's guardian or tutelary spirit); both Emerson and Nietzsche refer to one's 'over-soul' or 'higher self' as the personal goal of moral perfection for which one should reach. What is your view of self-fulfilment?

As you read the following excerpt, highlight or underline key words, such as *star, light, ray, fate, genius, lot/plot/ground* (representations of one's destiny or allotment in life), *thought, truth, conviction, education, trust, peace*, etc. Share with the class a sentence or two that resonates with you, and in discussion, interpret these sentences into your own words or examples.

Excerpt from Emerson's 1841 essay "Self-Reliance"

"Man is his own star; and the soul that can
Render an honest and a perfect man, Commands all light, all influence, all fate;
Nothing to him falls early or too late.
Our acts our angels are, or good or ill,
Our fatal shadows that walk by us still."

—Epilogue to Beaumont and Fletcher's *Honest Man's Fortune*

"I read the other day some verses written by an eminent painter which were original and not conventional. The soul always hears an admonition in such lines, let the subject be what it may. The sentiment they instil is of more value than any thought they may contain. To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men—that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost—and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment. Familiar as the voice of the mind is to each, the highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato, and Milton is that they set at naught books and traditions, and spoke not what men but what they thought. A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else, to-morrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another.

There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do nor does he know until he has tried. Not for nothing one face, one character, one



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fact, makes much impression on him, and another none. This sculpture in the memory is not without pre-established harmony. The eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it might testify of that particular ray. We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents. It may be safely trusted as proportionate and of good issues, so it be faithfully imparted, but God will not have his work made manifest by cowards. A man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and done his best; but what he has said or done otherwise, shall give him no peace. It is a deliverance which does not deliver.”

What Is Knowledge?

Relying on yourself to address questions of epistemology:

In a course such as this, you will encounter many philosophers and consider many new ideas. As you make that journey, consider what you now think about the topic of knowledge. You probably haven't given the topic of knowledge much consideration before; answer the questions that follow now and answer them again at the end of the unit. Then you can compare your thoughts that you have now with those you have at the end of the unit. (Use your own paper to be self-reliant.)

1. What is knowledge? [Define]
2. How is knowledge obtained? [Think and explain]
3. What makes us certain of our knowledge, and what are examples of certainty? [Inquire and apply]
4. Are some forms of knowledge better than others? [Compare and contrast: math or science versus history or cultural studies]
5. Does knowledge exist independent of human “knowers”? In other words, would another sentient species arrive at the same knowledge given time to evolve? [Deepen inquiry and communicate]
6. Can contradictory knowledges both be right? Does this violate the logical “law of non-contradiction” and “the excluded middle”: something can't *both* be and not be, nor can something *either* be or not be. The “law of identity” says something *is* what it is. Do these “laws” necessarily apply to all forms of knowledge? (Consider alchemy, or tribal healing practices such as shamanism.) [Extend and relate; discuss]

