

# PH9GJ-20 Emerson, Thoreau and Philosophy as a Way of Life

**21/22**

**Department**

Philosophy

**Level**

Taught Postgraduate Level

**Module leader**

Keith Ansell-Pearson

**Credit value**

20

**Assessment**

100% coursework

**Study location**

University of Warwick main campus, Coventry

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## Description

### Introductory description

This module offers an advanced introduction to American thought in the nineteenth century, notably the ideas of Emerson and Thoreau. It will cover a number of key writings of both thinkers, including several of Emerson's 'Essays' and Thoreau's text 'Walden'. It will also explore how a contemporary American philosopher, Stanley Cavell, has developed interpretations of both Emerson and Thoreau as making a vitally important contribution to our appreciation of the nature and possibilities of philosophy. The module is centred on the conception of 'philosophy as a way of life' and will explore the unique contribution Emerson and Thoreau are able to make to it. Topics to be covered include: Emerson and Thoreau's conceptions of philosophy, including their appreciations of Indian and Persian philosophical texts; conceptions of self-cultivation in terms of notions of self-reliance and nonconformity; conceptions and figurations of nature; ideas of the sublime; the 'political' dimension to their conception of philosophy as a way of life, including the critique of slavery and the concern with questions about race.

The module poses and examines some key questions, such as: how do the ideas of Emerson and Thoreau contribute to an appreciation of philosophy as a way of life? What contribution do their ideas make to our thinking about nature and the environment, and about education and society? Do they offer ideas that prove relevant to our ecological situation today? Is there an important political dimension to their writings, e.g their critique of slavery and thoughts on civil disobedience? How are they so positively receptive to texts of non-Western, and especially Indian philosophy and

Persian philosophy, and incorporate elements of these philosophies into their own thinking and practice of philosophy?

## **Module aims**

The core aim of this module is to expose graduate students to the ideas and writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau and to provide them with a rigorous instruction in their ideas and the unique contribution to existentialist philosophy they make. The module will adopt a novel approach to the two thinkers by exploring their writings in terms of the conception and appreciation of philosophy as a way of life, and inspired by the pioneering research into ancient and modern philosophy of Pierre Hadot (1922-2010). The module poses and examines some key questions, such as: how do the ideas of Emerson and Thoreau contribute to an appreciation of philosophy as a way of life? What contribution do their ideas make to our thinking about nature and the environment, and about education and society? Do they offer ideas that prove relevant to our ecological situation today? Is there an important political dimension to their writings, e.g their critique of slavery and thoughts about race? How are they so positively receptive to texts of non-Western, and especially Indian philosophy and Persian philosophy, and how do they incorporate elements of these philosophies into their own thinking and practice of philosophy?

## **Outline syllabus**

This is an indicative module outline only to give an indication of the sort of topics that may be covered. Actual sessions held may differ.

1. 'There are Nowadays Professors of Philosophy, but not Philosophers': Emerson, Thoreau and Philosophy as a Way of Life.
2. Emerson on the American Scholar: the Search for Originality.
3. Nonconformity: Emerson on 'Self-Reliance' & Thoreau on 'Life without Principle'.
4. Emerson, Thoreau on Nature: Towards a Philosophy of the Environment.
5. The Influence of Indian Philosophy and Persian Philosophy on Emerson & Thoreau.
6. READING WEEK
7. 'Poetry is the Gai Science': The Task of the Poet in Emerson & Thoreau.
8. Emerson and Thoreau on Slavery and Questions of Race.
9. Cavell on Emerson, Thoreau and American Philosophy
10. The Relevance of the Ideas of Emerson & Thoreau Today; Reflections on the Module.

## **Learning outcomes**

By the end of the module, students should be able to:

- Students should have a sound and incisive understanding and knowledge of the key ideas of Emerson and Thoreau and the contribution they can make to philosophy as a way of life. In addition, they should be able to appreciate the tensions that structure the work of the two thinkers to be studied and critically evaluate how they are to be negotiated and interpreted. The students should also be able to offer relevant support for and critical responses to the arguments and views set out in the texts examined during the course.
- Students should be able to discuss clearly in speech and in writing the issues raised by their close reading and critical analysis of the set texts. They should be able to engage with these

texts in a way that demonstrates relevant and appropriate philosophical and scholarly skills. The students should also be able to critically evaluate the relevant secondary literature.

- Students should be able to analyse and critically evaluate the key ideas and arguments presented in the primary texts, and come to an independent assessment of their merits with the aid of relevant secondary literature. The students should also be able to discern and critically evaluate the key ideas and arguments of the two American thinkers and have an appreciation of how their contributions can inform contemporary philosophizing about the nature of human experience and the applied function of philosophy.

## **Indicative reading list**

### Primary Material

Emerson, *Essential Writings* (The Modern Library).

Thoreau, *The Portable Thoreau* (Penguin).

Thoreau, *Collected Essays* (Library of America).

### A sample of Key Secondary Material

Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Blackwell, 1995).

Cornel West, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (Routledge, 2008).

Russell B. Goodman, *American Philosophy and the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge UP, 1990).

Russell B. Goodman, *American Philosophy before Pragmatism* (Oxford UP, 2015).

Armen T. Marsoobian (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to American Philosophy* (Blackwell, 2004).

Cheryl Misak, *The Oxford Handbook of American Philosophy* (Oxford UP, 2008).

Branka Arsic, *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson* (Harvard UP, 2010).

Branka Arsic, *Bird Relics: Grief and Vitalism in Thoreau* (Harvard UP, 2016).

Jane Bennett, *Thoreau's Nature: Ethics, Politics, and the Wild* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

Barbara Packer, *Emerson's Fall: A New Interpretation of the Major Essays* (Continuum, 1982).

Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Emerson* (Cambridge UP, 1999).

Joel Myerson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Thoreau* (Cambridge UP, 1995).

Stanley Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford UP, 2003).

Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (University of Chicago Press, 1981).

Laura Dassow Walls, *Thoreau* (Chicago UP, 2017).

Sandra Harbert Petrulionis & Laura Dassow Wells (eds.), *Thoreau's Walden for the 21st Century* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2007).

Rachel Permenter, 'Romantic Philosophy, Transcendentalism, and Nature', in Wyn Kelley (ed.), *A Companion to Herman Melville* (Blackwell, 2015), pp. 266-282.

Russell B. Goodman, 'East-West Philosophy in Nineteenth-Century America: Emerson and Hinduism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Oct. - Dec. 1990), pp. 625-645.

## **Research element**

Students will be exposed to the latest research on the thinkers and topics covered in the module, and the module leader will also utilise his own original ideas and insights.

## Subject specific skills

Skills in close reading.

Skills in critical evaluation.

Reasoning and logical skills.

Skills in understanding and critically engaging with questions in ethics, politics, and existentialism.

## Transferable skills

Lucid writing skills.

Clarity and precision of rational thinking.

Oral presentation skills.

Essay writing skills.

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## Study

### Study time

Type	Required
Lectures	9 sessions of 1 hour (50%)
Seminars	9 sessions of 1 hour (50%)
Total	18 hours

### Private study description

Essay Preparation & Writing; Reading; Seminar Preparation

## Costs

Category	Description	Funded by	Cost to student
Books and learning materials		Department	£0.00

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## Assessment

You must pass all assessment components to pass the module.

Students can register for this module without taking any assessment.

### Assessment group A

	<b>Weighting</b>	<b>Study time</b>
5000 word essay	100%	

### **Feedback on assessment**

Detailed comments on essays.

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### **Availability**

There is currently no information about the courses for which this module is core or optional.