

"A New World': Philosophical Idealism in America, 1700 to 1950"¹

Lecture IV

(Draft. Please do not quote without permission.)

When Emerson gave his eulogy for Thoreau, he recalled that "it was said of Plotinus that he was ashamed of his body." "'Tis very likely," Emerson speculated, that "he had good reason for it,—that his body was a bad servant, and he had not skill in dealing with the material world, as happens often to men of abstract intellect." "But Mr. Thoreau," he said, "was equipped with a most adapted and serviceable body."² Thoreau was also skilled in dealing with the material world.³ In fact his mechanical skills were almost magical, as Emerson goes on to illustrate:

He could pace sixteen rods more accurately than another man could measure them with rod and chain. He could find his path at night, he said, better by his feet than his eyes. He could estimate the measure of a tree very well by his eye; he could estimate the weight of a calf or a pig, like a dealer. From a box containing a bushel or more of loose pencils, he [the son of a pencil maker and, in his own right, an innovator in pencil design and manufacture] could take up with his hands fast enough just a dozen pencils at every grasp. He was a good swimmer, runner, skater, boatman, and would probably outwalk most countrymen in a day's journey. (p. 400)

Yet Thoreau was, for all that, an idealist, according to Emerson: as "abstract" a thinker (that is, as *ideal* a thinker) as Plato or Plotinus.⁴ My aim in this lecture is to determine in what sense this is true.

I agree with Emerson that Thoreau is an idealist, but I'm uneasy with his way of spelling that idealism out. Thoreau, he says, saw the material world "as a means and symbol" (p. 401), meaning that he saw it *at bottom* as a means or symbol, or as a means or symbol through and through: that nature was for him, as it was for Emerson in *Nature*, something "thoroughly mediate" and "made to serve." I don't think this is right, and I hope this afternoon to explain why. I concede—indeed, I want to emphasize—that Thoreau's *Walden*, like Emerson's *Nature*, is anthropocentric. (This is a point to which I'll return, but it deserves a brief discussion now.) When Thoreau decided to leave the woods after two years and two months of living there, he contemplated the path he'd beaten from the cabin's door to the shore of the pond. He wasn't worried about the erosion on the surface of the earth. He was worried about erosion in the depths of his soul. "I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there," he writes. "It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves. I had not lived there a week before my feet wore a path from my door to the pond-side; and though it is five or six years since I trod it [the year of publication in 1854, seven years after he ended his experiment], it is still quite distinct. It is true, I fear, that others may have fallen into it, and so helped to keep it open. The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels. How worn and dusty, then, must be the highways of the world, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity! I did not wish to take a cabin passage, but rather to go before the mast and on the deck of the world, for there I could best see the moonlight amid the mountains. I do not wish to go below now."⁵ The material world does function for Thoreau as means and symbol—or in Emersonian terms, as commodity and language—as this passage indicates. Almost everything said about nature in *Walden* can indeed be fit, without very little forcing, under one of Emerson's four headings. (As those of you who attended last week's lecture will remember, they are commodity, beauty, language, and discipline.) This is most obviously so in the book's first chapter, "Economy," which is an extended study of nature as

commodity. The fact that Thoreau devotes his longest chapter, a chapter Robinsonian (I mean, Crusoe-ian) in its intricacies, to a use of nature that occupies Emerson for barely a moment, has something to do with my uneasiness over Emerson's way of encapsulating Thoreau's idealism. Thoreau's idealism, as I will portray it today, is an engagement with a material world that has, disconcertingly but undeniably, some sort of standing of its own. It's a world with which Thoreau's soul eventually (and painfully) *collides*. Small collisions take place in *Walden*, but in "Ktaadn," as we'll see, there is a crash. Thoreau is intimate with nature as commodity and almost magically conversant with it, but his relationship to nature isn't as easy-going as Emerson's. Emerson's relationship to nature is more distant, genial but not intimate—more a matter of principle, perhaps, than of practice. At one point in his funeral oration, Emerson speaks insightfully of Thoreau's desire to "settle all his practice on an ideal foundation" (p. 395). *Walden*, as we'll see, is a foundationalist work, comparable in some respects to Descartes's *Meditations*. Thoreau's foundation, like Descartes's, is ideal, but the very fact that he's seeking a foundation for a practice that is, from the start, embodied or material, invests nature with a weight or authority that it does not, in Emerson's *Nature*, seem to carry. In the end, Thoreau works his way to an idealism that is, I think, more ethical than ontological.⁶

I'll begin today's lecture with *Walden*. I'll be asking how Thoreau seeks to combine idealism with meticulous, even loving, attention to the natural world, and to our footing in that world. (I'm not supposing that meticulous attention to nature is at odds with metaphysical idealism. Both Berkeley, in his description of the Cave of Dunmore, and Jonathan Edwards, in his Spider letter, give nature the kind of respectful attention that a divinely instituted system of signs seems to deserve.)⁷ Man, Thoreau wrote in his first book, "needs not only to be spiritualized, but *naturalized*, on the soil of the earth" (p. 307 in the Library of America edition). (This first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, was drafted while he lived at Walden Pond. It was published in 1849 by James Munroe, who had published Emerson's *Nature*. Thoreau agreed to charge the printing costs against his royalties, but his earnings on the stunningly heretical book never came to enough to cover the publisher's outlay. In 1853 he bought his way out of the agreement, taking on the unsold copies. "I have now a library of nearly nine hundred volumes," he wrote in his journal, "over seven hundred of which I wrote myself."⁸ They were stacked in his attic three weeks before he died, when he sold them to James T. Fields, who was also Emerson's publisher by then. Fields slapped on a new title page and sold the books after Thoreau's death.) *Walden* is an essay in naturalized spiritualization, and the essayist is a representative man, or at least a representative New Englander. (Proof: In II, 2, Thoreau says that in most books "the I, or first person, is omitted," but that "in this it will be retained." He requires of "every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life," and that is what he's pledged to give. But in the very first sentence of II, 3, his subject matter shifts from the first person to the second. He wants, he says, to say something about *you*—"you who read these pages, who are said to live in New England." He'll say something about you—that is, about us—by speaking about himself.) I'll be arguing that the project of *Walden* is only partially successful. The strains come out dramatically in *Walden* itself, and in different but perhaps even more dramatic ways in *The Maine Woods* and *Cape Cod*. (These books were posthumously published but they are not really "later" than *Walden*. Parts of both books had, in earlier versions, been printed in magazines or shopped to editors before *Walden* first appeared. This means that I won't be making a developmental argument.) I will then ask whether the partial character of this success really matters. I'll suggest that it may not, but to weigh my suggestion and determine its ultimate value, we'll have to look very closely at two things. The first is our place in nature and the universe as Thoreau conceives of them. Are we central, are we peripheral, or do we stand somewhere in between? The second is what it means, in Thoreau's view, to know oneself. For Thoreau, self-knowledge is a practical task. We discharge it not merely by thinking but also by living. The lived character of his project helps to

draw his apparently disparate tendencies together. It helps us to understand how someone can want to be infinite, but infinite in his own way.⁹

1. *Ethical idealism*

I've already suggested that as *Walden* begins, Thoreau renders himself representative or mythical. "In most books, the *I*, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking" (I, 2). Thoreau's *I* is, in the book's first paragraph, a historical individual—someone who wrote the following pages and for two years and two months lived alone in the woods in a house he built himself, earning his living by the labor of his hands (of his hands *only*, he says). This *I* wouldn't be obtruding so much on the notice of readers had it not been for inquiries made by others. "Some have asked what I go to eat; if I did not feel lonesome; if I was not afraid" (I, 2). But by the end of the book's second paragraph, he is already asking readers of this account of his own life "to accept such portions as apply to them" (I, 2). He isn't yet expecting a good fit for everyone: when he writes "I trust that none will stretch the seams in putting on the coat, for it may do good service to him whom it fits" (I, 2), he's asking each reader to be careful as he tries it on, so that it isn't made a poor fit for the next. It would be interesting to trace Thoreau's use of personal pronouns more carefully than I can do here, but the pattern I see is roughly this: the *I* that seems at first to be the book's sole concern soon becomes a *you*, then a *they*, and finally a *we*—as in paragraph eight: "I sometimes wonder that we can be so frivolous"—and it remains *we* until the book concludes. An *I* is present throughout, as in the sentence I've just quoted, but this *I* is largely "the first person that is speaking"—a "person" about whom we know no more than that. (I wonder about Thoreau's choice of the word "that." Why did he pass over "who," all in all a more obvious candidate? Could it be because an impersonal demonstrative is a better way of picking out an *I* who is no one in particular?)

Thoreau's *I* is something like the impersonal *I* that can, according to Kant, accompany all of my representations. Yet it isn't quite right to call it *I* impersonal. It is personal but *representative*—hence something with which each reader is invited to identify. And this *I* is talking about *us*: not about one physically located person, but about all physically located persons, or at least all who are nearby ("you who read these pages, who are said to live in New England"). The characteristic form of Thoreau's sentences, whether or not that form is made explicit, is "*I think that . . . we . . .*" There are two first-personal positions here. We're invited to identify with each, but in different ways. In identifying with the first, we become the *vehicles* of the book's concerns; in identifying with the second, we become its *objects*. It's very important, I think, that the book's objects are, not only at first and for as long as they exist, historically or physically situated. ("I would fain say something not so much concerning the Chinese and Sandwich Islanders as you who read these pages, who are said to live in New England, something about your condition, especially your outward condition or circumstances in this world, in this town, what it is, whether it is necessary that it be as bad as it is, whether it cannot be improved as well as not" [I, 3].) In the end, though this needn't compromise their historicity or "facticity," *these objective selves are identified with the vehicular* (or, if you like, the "subjective") *self*. That this identification is imperative is, in my view, part of the message of the book, and part of the content of its idealism. *Walden* puts its finger on a problem, and our identification with the subjective self—with the self inquiring into the problem—is part of the solution. Our identification with this self is what Thoreau calls "spiritualization." It is spiritualization because the subjective self is, at first, spiritually characterized. But this self has been identified with our objective selves. Hence it must also be "naturalized." The movement between spiritualization and naturalization—a movement

across an identity, its terms are presented in different "modes"—is the characteristic movement of *Walden*, and the source of a large part of its greatness.

I want to begin by considering the possibility of a strictly *ethical* idealism—an idealism that neither claims nor longs for metaphysical support. We encountered a definition of such idealism in Lecture I, in one of Royce's German sources, Richard Falckenberg's *History of Modern Philosophy*. "In ethics," he says there, idealism is exemplified "by all those views that locate the end of human beings in something higher than the satisfaction of sensual desire and selfish needs." Now the word "end" is multivalent. It can be used for the ends we seek in fact, or for the ends we ought to seek. I propose that we accept Falckenberg's formula, and that we assume it's meant to activate both senses of the word. Ethical idealism will then be the view that human beings actually seek something other than the satisfaction of sensual desire and selfish needs, and that they should. (Falckenberg himself must have had both claims in mind. Otherwise it would have been at least mildly discordant for him to speak of ends "higher" than the sensual or selfish, as opposed to merely "other.")¹⁰

When ethical idealism is given this twofold character, it's easy to see why one might want to back it up ontologically—and even idealistically. I can illustrate the point by some brief remarks on an aspect of Jonathan Edwards's thought that I wasn't able to consider in my first two lectures. Edwards was schooled in the same emerging science of human nature that Hume describes, and pledges to advance, as he begins his *Treatise of Human Nature*. For Edwards, this science was the science of *natural* man—man not yet lifted up by grace—and he thought it took two forms. The first was pessimistic or Hobbesian. You perhaps know the story, told by John Aubry, about Hobbes and the beggar. The beggar craved his alms. Hobbes handed him a coin, and his companion asked why. Hobbes replied: I saw he was uneasy. This made me uneasy, and by easing him, I eased myself. In the view of the Hobbesian pessimist, there is no impulse in us truly deserving of the name of altruism. The second option placed before Edwards was optimistic or, if you like, Hutchesonian. According to Hutcheson (as well as to Shaftesbury, who influenced him, and to Hume, who followed him), a principle of benevolence has been worked into our clay. This principle may pulse less urgently than self-love (that was certainly Hume's view), but it is present, and more than faintly influential. Hutcheson thought of benevolence as naturally occurring principle, but he felt at least some of the pressure towards idealist ontologizing that I'm now trying to describe. For he thought that our benevolence had been arranged for by a providential God. But in Edwards—and it is this I most want to emphasize—this pressure was more insistent, because his psychology of natural man was, at bottom, more like Hobbes's than it was like Hutcheson's. (I should note that I'm simplifying considerably here. But it's worth pointing out that although Hobbes pointedly refuses to condemn human nature as he finds it, his descriptions line up neatly with Puritan accounts of fallen man.)

In his main work on ethics, the posthumously published *Nature of True Virtue*, Edwards was resourceful in showing how, on the slender basis of a fundamentally Hobbesian psychology (supplemented, I should acknowledge, by some other principles, among them a devotion to one's offspring, and a tendency, akin to sympathy, to imagine oneself in the place of others), various *simulacra* of benevolence or true virtue could be accounted for. But, Edwards thought, there really *is* (though it is rare) true virtue—a universal love irreducible to selfish impulse, even when it has been redirected by association or modified by natural principles that attach us to particular persons. It is, in other words, in fact the case that human beings are sometimes drawn by something other than selfish need or sensual desire. If we assume that this need and this desire have their basis in the body, we're forced to acknowledge an intrusion of divine spirit into the corporeal world. This isn't quite idealism as I defined it in Lecture I, because it hasn't been said

that spirit is more real than body. But spirit at least has its foot in the door. It seems nearer than it does on Hutcheson's view, because our route to an awareness of its influence and presence in the world is more direct. Spirit isn't a distant cause of all to which we've found our way by contemplating nature's overall design, but the immediate cause of a particular fact that we are, when we see things clearly, unable to deny. (There is of course the question: could it be that what we call true virtue is just another *simulacrum* of virtue? This is a question that absorbed Edwards the evangelist, for whom it took this more general form: what are the reliable signs of religious affection?)¹¹

So far I've shown how one might get to ontology, and perhaps even to idealist ontology, from what might be called the psychological side of ethical idealism, the claim that we do, as a matter of psychological fact, seek something other than sensual or selfish satisfaction. But one might also get there from the normative side. For if it's true that we ought to seek something more than the sensual or selfish, and if this claim is made not from the point of view of our bodily needs and desires, but from a point of view beyond them, it can easily seem that what makes it true is our being under the command of something other than body.

A strictly ethical idealism would resist or impassively absorb the pressures I've described. It would make its two claims and then come to a halt. I want to suggest that Thoreau manages something like this. *Walden* is an extended defense of ethical idealism, but unlike Emerson, who also affirms ethical idealism, Thoreau doesn't seek to provide his idealism with ontological support. (Nor does he *infer* ethical idealism from his ontology, as Emerson imagines the transcendentalist might do: "From this transfer of the world into the consciousness, this beholding of all things in the mind, follows easily his whole ethics" ["The Transcendentalist"].) I have to say immediately that he sometimes *seems* to do so. Thus he writes in *Walden* that "only great and worthy things have any permanent and absolute existence" (II, 21), and that "the greatest gains and values," though least appreciated, "are the highest reality" (XI, 7). But I believe that these are value judgments cast in an ontologizing idiom. I think so because Thoreau's published writings on nature (I cannot speak synoptically of the journal here) speak in defense of value judgments, and their grounds are *experimental*. They appeal not to an underlying metaphysics, but to experience. They affirm a material world that Thoreau portrays, at least for the most part, as mind-independent. This world presents him with a series of challenges. Some he surmounts. Some he does not. (Some seem insurmountable.)¹² But his method throughout is practical, not theoretical. (Of course I'll have to explain why, once the method is followed, he writes about it. But this is basically because his practice is representative or emblematic.) He does not deny the fundamentality of matter. Nor does he idealistically construe it. When all is said and done, its existence is something he cannot find his way around. And I believe he takes this to be a good thing.

I'm not suggesting, by the way, that Thoreau's metaphysically indifferent idealism is to be compared to the indifference of, say, a world-weary Richard Rorty, who reflects on philosophy's past and sees no hope of its providing the kind of underpinning for cherished but fragile values that philosophers once sought. It's just that Thoreau doesn't get exercised about metaphysics. He directs his energies elsewhere, despite the ontologizing idiom that his transcendentalist environment may have made obligatory. (Here it's worth remembering that when Thoreau called John Brown a "transcendentalist above all," he wasn't complimenting his metaphysics. He meant, as he went on to say, that Brown was "a man of ideas and principles"—a man in pursuit of more than selfish or sensual ends.)

2. *The argument of Walden*

Let me try now to find an argument in *Walden*. It is, I want to say, an experimental argument, and I offer the following remarks by Thoreau, most of them from the first chapter of *Walden*, that this was his own view of it:

No way of thinking or doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof. (I, 10)

I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They have told me nothing, and probably cannot tell me anything to the purpose. Here is life, an experiment to a great extent untried by me. (I, 10)

But man's capacities have never been measured: nor are we to judge of what he can do by any precedents, so little has been tried. (I, 12)

"Tried" here does of course mean *attempted*, but Thoreau is also thinking of *experimental* trials, as he suggests a few lines later:

We might try our lives by a thousand simple tests. (I, 13)

I sometimes try my acquaintances by such tests as this. (I, 35)

This last remark lends a further color to his talk of trials—a Socratic one—to which I will return.

How could youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living. (I, 72)

All things considered, that is, considering the importance of a man's soul and of today, notwithstanding the short time occupied by my experiment, nay, partly even because of its transient character, I believe that that was doing better than any farmer in Concord did that year. (I, 76)

Once I went so far as to slaughter a woodchuck which ravaged by bean-field . . . and devour him, partly for experiment's sake. (I, 79)

I learned from my two years' experience that it would cost incredibly little trouble to obtain one's necessary food, even in this latitude; that a man may use as simple a diet as the animals, and yet retain health and strength. (I, 82)

I found by experiment that I could make a very good molasses either of pumpkins or beets. (I, 85)

I short, I am convinced, both by faith and experience, that to maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely. (I, 98)

The present was my next experiment of this kind. (II, 7)

We are the subjects of an experiment which is not a little interesting to me. (V, 10)

I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. If you have build castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them. (XVIII, 5)

The experiment reported in *Walden* is a trial of two hypotheses, one lower, one higher. The lower hypothesis is that we can achieve what Thoreau calls the "gross necessities of life" (I, 16)—meaning "whatever, of all that man obtains by his own exertions, has been from the first, or from long use has become, so important to human life that few, if any, whether from savageness, or poverty, or philosophy, ever attempt to do without it"—at an unexpectedly low cost. "The necessities of life for man in this climate may . . . be distributed under the several heads of Food, Shelter, Clothing, and Fuel" (I, 17). All four are subsumed in the class that Emerson had entitled "Commodity."¹³ Emerson's chapter on "Commodity" occupied five rather casual paragraphs. "Under the general name of Commodity, I rank all those advantages which our senses owe to nature. This, of course, is a benefit which is temporary and mediate, not ultimate, like its service to the soul" (p. 12). Here Emerson anticipates Thoreau's higher hypothesis. But why is Thoreau's chapter on "Economy" is so much longer than "Commodity," and so much more detailed? It is, as I've already observed, Robinsonian. It is practically a manual that one might follow. I think those of you who've read *Robinson Crusoe* will agree that Defoe's detailed account of Crusoe's material life—his labors to provide himself with what Thoreau calls the "necessaries"—is one of its greatest pleasures. The corresponding account of Thoreau's labors is, likewise, one of the greatest pleasures of *Walden*. But the detail Thoreau offers is also required, I believe, by his experimental project, and that in two ways. The first has to do with Emerson's hasty and perhaps even ill-considered treatment of nature's benefits as commodity. He calls them "temporary and mediate, not ultimate, like [nature's] service to the soul." That's fine as far as it goes. Thoreau agrees. But though the benefits of nature as commodity are temporary and mediate, the *need* for them is perpetual, and for all Emerson has shown or even said, attaining those benefits might be all-consuming. Thoreau undertakes to show that they are not, and to show it experimentally.

It may be objected that I've explained why Thoreau went to live at Walden, but not why he wrote about it in "Economy" as he did. He needed to *live through* the details, but why did he need to write about them? Here I have quite a lot to say, but I'll try to be brief. Thoreau is attempting a *reproducible* experiment, one that his readers had to be persuaded they could *replicate*. This is part of what it means for the *I* of *Walden* to be representative or mythical, and here comparisons with *Crusoe* are particularly apt, because Thoreau was alert to *Crusoe's* mythic power:

All nations love the same jests and tales, Jews, Christians, and Mahometans, and the same translated suffice for all. All men are children, and of one family. The same tale sends them all to be, and wakes them in the morning. Joseph Wolff, the missionary, distributed copies of Robinson Crusoe, translated into Arabic, among the Arabs, and they made a great sensation. "Robinson Crusoe's adventures and wisdom," says he, "were read by Muhammedans in the marketplaces of Sanaa, Hodyeda, and Loheya, and admired and

believed!" On reading the book, the Arabians exclaimed, "O, that Robinson Crusoe must have been a great prophet!"

To some extent, mythology is only the most ancient history and biography. So far from being false or fabulous in the common sense, it contains only enduring and essential truth, the I and you, and here and there, the now and then, being omitted. (*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, p. 49 in the Library of American edition)

You'll remember that in *Walden*, the *I* is not omitted. Neither is the here or the now and then. All are present and emphasized. But that is because Thoreau has found a way of being mythical or representative in spite of that, by carrying out an experiment that could, thanks to the details he conscientiously supplies, be generalized or reproduced.¹⁴ (There is, I should say, another myth behind "Economy," the myth of Adam—perhaps not Adam and Eve but Adam, as I may eventually be able to explain.)¹⁵

I said there were two reasons for the detail in "Economy." The second has to do with Thoreau's concern for foundations:

The walls must be stripped, our lives must be stripped, and beautiful housekeeping and beautiful living be laid for a foundation. (I, 56)

It would be worth the while to build still more deliberately than I did, considering, for instance, what foundation a door, a window, a cellar, a garret, have in the nature of man, and perchance never raising any superstructure until we found a better reason for it than our temporal necessities even. (I, 66)

A sentimental reformer in architecture, he began at the cornice, not at the foundation. (I, 67)

It would be *better* . . . for the students . . . even to lay the foundation themselves. (I.72)

By closing the eyes and slumbering, and consenting to be deceived by shows, men establish and confirm their daily life of routine and habit everywhere, which is still build on illusory foundations. (II, 21)

It affords me no satisfaction to commence a spring arch before I have got a solid foundation. Let us not play at kittle-benders. There is a solid bottom everywhere. (XVIII, 14)

To live deliberately ("let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature," II, 22) is to seek a foundation for one's actions—a foundation in human nature, rather than in custom or habit. This will make it possible to separate necessities from "superfluities," a distinction that Emerson's talk of "benefits" papers over.¹⁶ But to persuade us of the separation's viability, Thoreau has to give us the details.¹⁷

The higher hypothesis experimentally confirmed in *Walden* is that once our needs are met, we're better off "adventuring on life now" and "plucking its finer fruits" than we are seeking material comforts, luxuries, or superfluities. We're better off, that is, if the ends we seek aren't selfish or sensual:

When [a man] has obtained those things which are necessary to life, there is another alternative than to obtain the superfluities; and that is, to adventure on life now, his vacation from humbler toil having commenced. (I, 20).

Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them. Their fingers, from excessive toil, are too clumsy and tremble too much for that. (I, 6)

But what are these more nourishing ends or "finer fruits"? It isn't easy to say. I've already quoted a long passage from XVIII, 5, where Thoreau states his findings. If you look back on it, you'll see how difficult his higher findings are to paraphrase.

In all of the chapters that follow "Economy," including even "The Bean-Field," where we hear again about nature as commodity, nature serves Thoreau in one of the other three ways identified by Emerson: as beauty, as language, and as discipline. By the end, he has been disciplined or educated. But what exactly has he learned? I see three extractable (or paraphrasable) lessons.¹⁸ The first is universal innocence:

Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself. (II, 14)

There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of nature and has his senses still. There was never yet such a storm but it was Aeolian music to a healthy and innocent ear. Nothing can rightly compel a simple and brave man to a vulgar sadness. While I enjoy the friendship of the seasons I trust that nothing can make life a burden to me. (V, 4)

The indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature—of sun and wind and rain, or summer and winter—such health, such cheer, they afford forever! (V, 17)

The impression made on a wise man [by nature] is that of universal innocence. Poison is not poisonous after all, nor are any wounds fatal. (XVII, 23)

We too are immersed in this innocence:

A single gentle rain makes the grass many shades greener. So our prospects brighten on the influx of better thoughts. We should be blessed if we lived in the present always and took advantage of every accident that befell us, like the grass which confesses the slightest influence of the slightest dew that falls upon us; and did not spend our time in atoning for the neglect of past opportunities, which we call doing our duty. We loiter in winter while it is already spring. In a pleasant spring morning all men's sins are forgiven. Such a day is a truth to vice. While such a sun holds out to burn, the vilest sinner may return. Through our own recovered innocence we discern the innocence of our neighbors. You may have known your neighbor yesterday for a thief, a drunkard, or a sensualist, and merely pitied or despised him, and despaired of the world; but the sun shines bright and warm this first spring morning, re-creating the world and you meet him at some serene work, and see how his exhausted and debauched veins expand with still joy and bless the new day, feel the spring influence with the innocence of infancy, and all his faults are forgotten. There is not only an atmosphere of good will about him, but even a savor of holiness groping for

expression, blindly and ineffectually perhaps, like a new-born instinct, and for a short hour the south hillside echoes to no vulgar jest. You see some innocent fair shoots preparing to burst from his gnarled rind and try another year's life, tender and fresh as the youngest plant. Even he has entered into the joy of his Lord. Why the jailer does not leave open his prison doors—why the judge does not dismiss his case—why the preacher does not dismiss his congregation! It is because they do not obey the hint which God gives them, nor accept the pardon which he freely offers to all. (XVII, 18)

In Thoreau's mind, the innocence of nature stands for many things, among them its moral indifference. I hope I can come back to this. Our own particular innocence is a liberation from the past and its channeling or blocking of our future possibilities. We are re-created every morning. As Mencius says in a passage quoted by Thoreau in the paragraph following the one I've quoted, "a return to goodness [is] produced each day." We thereby approach, says Mencius, "the primitive nature of man" (XVII, 19). If we've fallen, we're propped again the next day.¹⁹ "There is," as Thoreau says in *Walden's* conclusion, "an incessant influx of novelty into the world"; it is wrong to think "that we can change our clothes only" (XVIII, 17). Like Edwards, Thoreau uses continuous creation to disconnect us from the past. Unlike Edwards, he doesn't think that the will of God (a personal God in whom he does not believe: "a sad mistake," he says on p. 63 of *A Week*) ties us back even to our own pasts and deeds, much less to the past and guilty deeds of Adam.²⁰ Our innocence is (or entails) our perpetual perfectibility:

The life in us is like the water in the river. It may rise this year higher than man has ever known it, and flood the parched uplands; even this may be the eventful year, which will drown out all the muskrats. . . . Every one has heard the story which has gone the rounds of New England, of a strong and beautiful bug which came out of the dry leaf of an old table of apple-tree wood, which had stood in a farmer's kitchen for sixty year, first in Connecticut, afterward in Massachusetts—from an egg deposited in the living tree many years earlier still, as appeared by counting the annual layers beyond it; which was heard gnawing out for several weeks, hatched perchance by the heat of an urn. Who does not feel his faith in a resurrection and immortality strengthened by the hearing of this? Who knows what beautiful and winged life, whose egg has been buried for ages under many concentric layers of woodness in the dead dry life of society, deposited at first in the alburnum of the green and living tree, which has been gradually converted into the semblance of its well-seasoned tomb—heard perchance gnawing out for years by the astonished family of man, as they sat round the festive board—may unexpectedly come forth from midst society's most trivial and handseled furniture, to enjoy its perfect summer life at last.

I do not say that John or Jonathan will realize all this; but such is the character of that morrow which mere lapse of time can never make to dawn. The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star. (XVIII, 18, 19)

Thoreau speaks of faith here.²¹ Elsewhere he speaks of trust, as when he writes that "to love wisdom is to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust" (I, 19). "We may safely trust a good deal more than we do" (I, 15). But can this be squared with his insistence on experiment—with his warning that "no way of thinking or doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof" (I, 10)? His point, I take it, is that we have to trust even with proof. The evidence of past performance is so meagre, and the expectation of

increasing perfection so audacious, that we can't escape the need for an inductive leap. The need is acknowledged in the following passage from the journals:²²

We believe that the possibility of the future far exceeds the accomplishment of the past. We review the past with common sense, but we anticipate the future with transcendental senses. In our sanest moments we find ourselves naturally expecting or prepared for far greater changes than any which we have experienced within the period of distinct memory.

We can reproduce the experimental evidence for Thoreau's higher hypothesis in either of two ways: by living as he advises, or by reading his book. (Reading his book is actually a special case of living as he advises. So long as we're reading wholeheartedly, we're no longer seeking necessities, comforts, or luxuries, but plucking some of life's finer fruits.) Our reward in either case is a perception of perfectibility. That perception goes far beyond anything either our living or our reading could provide, but I think Thoreau wants to say that in either case, we'd be trusting the audacious perception *with* proof: not with the kind of proof that guarantees truth, but with the only kind of proof—more infirm than anything Hume (say) would call a proof—that the nature of the case allows.²³

I said that the higher phase of Thoreau's experiment teaches a second extractable lesson: it is that the search for life's finer fruits is itself among life's finer fruits. *Walden* is a Socratic book. It calls at first for an admission of ignorance: "how can he remember well his ignorance—which his growth requires—who has so often to use his knowledge?" (I, 6). The knowledge we so often use is the craft knowledge of the "laboring man" (I, 6). The ignorance we are unwilling to acknowledge is the ignorance of our higher (or ideal) ends. "When a man is warmed by the several modes which I have described"—our vital or animal heat being the common currency into which any commodity can be cashed and its value measured—"what does he want next?" (I, 20). The book concludes by urging us to seek knowledge of our proper wants or higher ends:

Be . . . the Mungo Park, the Lewis and Clark and Frobisher, of your own streams and oceans; explore your own higher latitudes. (XVIII, 2)

Explore the private sea, the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean of one's being alone. (XVIII, 2)

If you would learn to speak all tongues and conform to the customs of all nations, if you would travel farther than all travellers, be naturalized in all climes, and cause the Sphinx to dash her head against a stone, even obey the precept of the old philosopher, and Explore thyself. (XVIII, 2)

The third and final paraphrasable lesson, on which I will not now elaborate, is that "our whole life is startlingly moral" (XI, 10). "There is never an instant's truce between virtue and vice," and there is never a doubt on which side we should stand (XI, 10). Moral laws or moral sentiments disclose our most important ends, and "goodness is the only investment that never fails" (XI, 10). I will return to these points in Lecture VI.²⁴

I've now made my best attempt to paraphrase Thoreau's higher findings, and I wouldn't be surprised to learn that you find it rather thin. In Thoreau's defense—or in my own—it is worth recalling his declaration that to love wisdom (that is, to philosophize) is "to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically" (I, 19). Perhaps I was wrong to say that there are two ways of participating in his higher findings. Perhaps we can participate in them only

by attempting an experiment of our own. But an attentive reading of the whole of *Walden* is certainly more akin to an experimental trial than is the hearing of my paraphrases. Perhaps it will offer proof enough; readers of *Walden* will have to decide that for themselves.

I've done my best, then, to give you what I see as the argument of *Walden*. And if the argument actually offered is to be the measure of the idealism it defends, I think we have to say that the idealism of *Walden* is ethical, not metaphysical.²⁵ No metaphysical premisses are put forward, and no metaphysical consequences are derived.²⁶ The conclusions are ethically idealist in Falckenberg's sense and the proof, so far as it can be given, is empirical or practical.

I've already said that *Walden* makes an anthropocentric argument. By that I mean, among other things, that its argument isn't "eco-centric." The historian Carolyn Merchant writes that²⁷

Walden, the result of an experiment in living that took place between 1845 and 1848 south of Concord, Massachusetts, was an inquiry into the question: How can a human being obtain the physical and spiritual necessities for survival with as little impact on nature as possible? To begin living at Walden Pond, one did not need to drain a marsh or clear-cut the land. In the communal spirit of the subsistence culture, Thoreau borrowed a few tools, cut down only those pines essential for timber, recycled the siding and windows of an old shanty, and reused bricks, shingles, and windows to construct a dwelling oriented toward the sun. Rather than a property owner, he considered himself a visitor passing through nature, availing himself of squatter's rights.

I find myself wanting to disagree with almost all that Merchant says here. I think that the leading question of *Walden* is closer to this: "How can a human being be freed to adventure upon life—to seek those spiritual goods that are so clearly unnecessary, given that almost all of us live, however desperately or uncontentedly, without them—and to obtain the physical necessities (or 'necessaries,' as Thoreau calls them) with as little impact on his or her own time and labor as possible?" A small impact on nature is, for Thoreau, simply a consequence of the small impact the life he recommends will have on our time and labor. What remains of nature will then be useful, he follows Emerson in suggesting, for the discipline and instruction of the human spirit. From the fact that the central argument of *Walden* is anthropocentric it doesn't however follow that the book as a whole is anthropocentric, or that Thoreau's considered view of nature is anthropocentric.²⁸ (And "anthropocentrism" is, in any case, a very slippery term.) I hope to return to Thoreau's anthropocentrism as I conclude. I turn now to what is, I think, a related matter: the collisions between Thoreau and nature that I mentioned as I began.

3. *Man (representative man) against nature*

The first collision comes in *Walden*, in the chapter on "Higher Laws," immediately after what I've called the third paraphrasable lesson ("our whole life is startlingly moral," XI, 10).²⁹ What I'm about to say is crude, and it may not be correct, but I think it's useful to say it, if only to clear the air: he seems to be talking about his penis. And if he is talking about his penis, you'll recognize that his metaphors for it are still in use:

We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly expelled; like the worms which, even in life and health, occupy our bodies. Possibly we may withdraw from it, but

never change its nature. I fear that it may enjoy a certain health of its own; that we may be well, yet not pure. (XI, 11)

Whether or not I'm right about what's being described here, the associated urges are sexual. (This is all it takes to make us realize that neither sex nor love figures directly in "Economy"—neither as necessities, comforts, or luxuries, nor as finer fruits. Sex and love do enter the chapter indirectly, via their consequences, in the form of a poor Irish family. They are leaving their shanty near Walden, just one step ahead of their creditors. From them Thoreau purchases the boards and nails for his cabin.) It seems fair to assume that during his lonely nights at Walden, Thoreau's genius has been struggling against them:

The generative energy, which, when we are loose, dissipates and makes us unclean, when we are continent invigorates and inspires us. Chastity is the flowering of man; and what are called Genius, Heroism, Holiness, and the like, are but various fruits which succeed it. Man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open. By turns our purity inspires and our impurity casts us down. He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established. Perhaps there is none but has cause for shame on account of the inferior and brutish nature to which he is allied. I fear that we are such gods or demigods only as fauns or satyrs, the divine allied to beasts, the creatures of appetite, and that, to some extent, our very life is our disgrace. (XI, 11)

He next quotes Donne: "How happy's he who hath due place assigned / To his beasts and disafforested his mind!" This call for internal deforestation always comes as a surprise to my students, so at odds is it with the prevailing image of Thoreau as eco-centric champion of external nature. It is elaborated in the next paragraph, with the return of the reptile:

When the reptile is attacked at one mouth of his burrow, he shows himself at another. If you would be chaste, you must be temperate. What is chastity? How shall a man know if he is chaste? He shall not know it. We have heard of this virtue, but we know not what it is. We speak conformably to the rumor which we have heard. From exertion come wisdom and purity; from sloth ignorance and sensuality. (XI, 12)

To the end of his chapter on "Economy," Thoreau had appended what he called "Complemental Verses," by Thomas Carew, on "The Pretensions of Poverty." Their interpretation in this setting is, I gather, controversial, but to me it seems clear that Thoreau is using the verses to contrast the monkish virtues a reader might *suppose* he's celebrating in "Economy" with the heroic and pagan virtues he's actually promoting.³⁰ Carew speaks in the poem of the "low abject brood" that "fix their seats in mediocrity"—*mediocrity* being, I take it, the Aristotelian mean, the balance point between a vice of defect and a vice of excess. These "become your servile minds," the poet says, "but we advance / Such virtues only as admit excess"—"that heroic virtue / For which antiquity hath left no name, / But patterns only, such as Hercules, Achilles, Theseus." "Back to thy loath'd cell;" the poet concludes, "And when thou seest the new enlightened sphere, / Study to know but what those worthies were." For Thoreau, chastity has become a heroic virtue. "If you would avoid uncleanness, and all the sins," he writes (and now I'm back to "Higher Laws" and XI, 12), "work earnestly, though it be"—and here I assume that we're meant to recall Hercules—"at cleaning a stable." We're to be strenuous, Herculean, even excessive, in our pursuit of chastity. Then comes an especially startling sentence (startling when viewed against the prevailing eco-centric image of Thoreau): "Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome."³¹

Thoreau is courageously apologetic about the passages I've shown you:

I hesitate to say these things, but it is not because of the subject—I care not how obscene my *words* are, but because I cannot speak of them without betraying my impurity. (XI, 13)

Thoreau made the same confession to his friend Harrison Gray Otis Blake, to whom he had sent his essay on love. He sent "the thoughts and chastity and sensuality with diffidence and shame," he told his friend, "not knowing how far I speak to the condition of men generally, or how far I betray my peculiar defects."³² These confessions recalls his distaste for Whitman, whose "sensuality" disturbed him. "He does not celebrate love at all. It is as if the beasts spoke."³³

When we are told that nature must be overcome, its existence is neither denied nor idealistically construed. It is downgraded, but only in value. In fact I'm willing to go farther: it seems to me that in these passages on chastity, the fundamental reality of nature or body is affirmed, or at least presupposed. Its existence is unfortunate but undeniable. To my ear at least, this is the tendency of the last passages on this theme that I will quote:

Every man is the builder of a temple, called his body, to the god he worships, after a style purely his own, nor can he get off by hammering marble instead. We are all sculptors and painters, and our material is our own flesh and blood and bones. (XI, 14)

Here the body is represented as something on which we ought to work, but as "material" that is even less compliant than marble. That idealism must take a bodily form is also the moral of the story, a myth of ascent and inevitable descent, that Thoreau tells in the final paragraph of "Higher Laws":³⁴

John Farmer sat at his door one September evening, after a hard day's work, his mind still running on his labor more or less. Having bathed, he sat down to re-create his intellectual man. . . . He had not attended to the train of his thoughts long when he heard some one playing a flute, and that sound harmonized with his mood. Still he thought of his work But the notes of the flute came home to his ears out of a different sphere from that he worked in, and suggested work for certain faculties which slumbered in him. They gently did away with the street, and the village, and the state in which he lived. A voice said to him—Why do you stay here and live this mean moiling life, when a glorious existence is possible for you? Those same stars twinkle over other fields than these.—But how to come out of this condition and actually migrate thither? All that he could think of was to practise some new austerity, to let his mind descend into his body and redeem it, and treat himself with ever increasing respect. (XI, 15)

The second collision I want to discuss gives more emphatic evidence of the strictly ethical character of Thoreau's idealism. It comes not in *Walden* but in the "Ktaadn" chapter of *The Maine Woods*. I should say, briefly, before presenting you with the passages, that in his descriptions of nature, Thoreau makes use of two fairly well-controlled sets of images, which I'll call the Edenic and the Titanic. You may not know that Walden Pond is very close to the village of Concord, Massachusetts, not much more than a mile away. Emerson, who owned the land on which Thoreau built his cabin, regularly went there and back on afternoon walks. Thoreau did not think of the Walden woods as a wilderness (see among other passages p. 708 of *The Maine Woods*, on the wilderness v. the tame forest of today); he saw it more as a garden, and his images for it tended towards the Edenic. But his characteristic images for Ktaadn, the tallest mountain in

Maine, are Titanic. In his account of his approach to the summit, the contrast with a garden is very clear:

The mountain seemed a vast aggregation of loose rocks, as if some time it had rained rocks, and they lay as they fell on the mountain sides, nowhere fairly at rest, but leaning on each other, all rocking-stones, with cavities between, but scarcely any soil or smoother shelf. They were the raw materials of a planet dropped from an unseen quarry, which the vast chemistry of nature would anon work up, or work down, into the smiling and verdant plains and valleys of earth. This was an undone extremity of the globe; as in lignite, we see coal in the process of formation. (pp. 639-40 in the Library of America edition)

. . . Occasionally, when the windy columns broke in to me, I caught sight of a dark, damp crag to the right or left; the mist driving ceaselessly between it and me. It reminded me of the creations of the old epic and dramatic poets, of Atlas, Vulcan, the Cyclops, and Prometheus. Such was Caucasus and the rock where Prometheus was bound. Aeschylus had no doubt visited such scenery as this. It was vast, Titanic, and such as man never inhabits. Some part of the beholder, even some vital part, seems to escape through the loose grating of his ribs as he ascends. He is more lone than you can imagine. There is less of substantial thought and fair understanding in him than in the plains where men inhabit. His reason is dispersed and shadowy, more thin and subtile, like the air. Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got him at disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty. She does not smile on him as in the plains. She seems to say sternly, Why came ye here before your time. This ground is not prepared for you. Is it not enough that I smile in the valleys? I have never made this soil for thy feet, this air for thy breathing, these rocks for thy neighbors. I cannot pity nor fondle thee here, but forever relentlessly drive thee hence to where I *am* kind. (pp. 640-1)

We're being prepared for a collision here, but it comes on his way down:

Perhaps I most fully realized that this was primeval, untamed, and forever untamable Nature, or whatever else men call it, while coming down this part of the mountain. We were passing over "Burnt Lands," burnt by lightning, perchance, though they showed no recent marks of fire, hardly so much as a charred stump, but looked rather like a natural pasture for the moose and deer, exceedingly wild and desolate, with occasional strips of timber crossing them, and low poplars springing up, and patches of blueberries here and there. I found myself traversing them familiarly, like some pasture run to waste, or partially reclaimed by man; but when I reflected what man, what brother or sister or kinsman of our race made it and claimed it, I expected the proprietor to rise up and dispute my passage. It is difficult to conceive of a region uninhabited by man. We habitually presume his presence and influence everywhere. And yet we have not seen pure Nature, unless we have seen her thus vast and drear and inhuman, though in the midst of cities. Nature was here something savage and awful though beautiful. I looked with awe at the ground I trod on, to see what the Powers had made there, the form and fashion and material of their work. This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man's garden, but the unhandseled globe. It was not lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor woodland, nor lea, nor arable, nor waste land. It was the fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth, as it was made forever and ever,—to be the dwelling of man, we say,—so Nature made it, and man may use it if he can. Man was not to be associated with it. It was Matter, vast, terrific,—not his Mother Earth that we have heard of, not for him to tread on, or be buried in,—no, it were being too familiar even to

let his bones lie there,—the home, this, of Necessity and Fate. There was clearly felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man. It was a place for heathenism and superstitious rites,—to be inhabited by men nearer of kin to the rocks and to wild animals than we. We walked over it with a certain awe, stopping, from time to time, to pick the blueberries which grew there, and had a smart and spicy taste. Perchance where our wild pines stand, and leaves lie on their forest floor, in Concord, there were once reapers, and husbandmen planted grain; but here not even the surface had been scarred by man, but it was a specimen of what God saw fit to make this world. What is it to be admitted to a museum, to see a myriad of particular things, compared with being shown some star's surface, some hard matter in its home! (pp. 645-6)

But the real site of the collision is unexpected and closer to home: the rudest collision is not with the hard matter of the mountain's rocks, but with the hard matter of his own body.

I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one,—*that* my body might,—but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! the *common sense*! *Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we?* (p. 646)

Here the mind-body problem is being enacted.³⁵ The existence of body is not denied. Nor is it said to depend on mind. The existence of a body is a surd. Ontological idealism isn't affirmed, but embarrassed or perplexed—so much so that by the end of the passage, Thoreau seems no longer sure that he is the ghost he thought he was. His identity and sense of location have been disrupted.³⁶ We are, after all, like the Titans, "earth-born," as he says in *A Week*, as well as "heaven-born" (p. 308).

4. *Anthropocentrism in Walden*

That nature is what might be called an "overlapping thing," rather than something bound by human ends and human uses, is a thought present even in *Walden*:

Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of wildness—to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground. At the same time are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature. We must be refreshed by the sign of inexhaustible vigor, vast and titanic features, the sea-coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and decaying trees, the thunder-cloud, and the rain which lasts three weeks and produces freshets. We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander. We are cheered when we observe the vulture feeding on the carrion which disgusts and disheartens us, and deriving health and strength from the repast. (XVII, 23)

This is an elusive passage, because it puts nature's uncontainedness or inhumanity to human use. Thus it might be read as an unwitting confirmation of Emerson's thesis—as an admission that nature is subservient to us after all. But I think this would be a error, at least from Thoreau's point of view. That we can put even Titanic nature to work for us doesn't mean that such a use was in any way intended. It doesn't mean that such use is somehow underwritten by "reality." As Emerson himself says in the 1849 motto of *Nature*, "the eye reads omens where"—meaning wherever—"it goes." We can read a human purpose into anything. "The universe constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions," Thoreau writes (II, 21), but he does not always seem to think so. That nature serves us may tell us less about the "ontological status" of nature (that is it subordinate to us, or less fundamentally real than "we" are) than it tells us about ourselves. Thoreau does think that we *should* make use of nature's wildness: that by abashing us or humbling us, aloof and indifferent nature teaches an important truth. I understand why one might seek ontological backing for this truth, but I do not think that Thoreau himself is searching for that backing.³⁷ That his moral sentiments require no such certification may be, for him, the surest sign of their reality. "I know that there are many stars," he says in *A Week*. "I know that they are far enough off, bright enough, steady enough in their orbits,—but what are they all worth?" (p. 314).³⁸

Kenneth P. Winkler
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¹ This is the text of the fourth in a series of six lectures, honoring Isaiah Berlin, delivered at Oxford University in January and February, 2012. For the opportunity to give them, I'm grateful to the benefactors and electors of the Sir Isaiah Berlin Visiting Professorship in the History of Ideas, to the Faculty of Philosophy, and to Corpus Christi College. The present lecture was delivered on February 7. This document isn't an actual transcript of my talk—it was prepared before I spoke (and lightly edited afterwards), and contains more than I was actually able to cover—but it is written as if to be spoken. It is more loosely structured than a formal paper would be, and the notes sometimes contain reminders to myself. It is, above all, a draft piece of work, and I ask that it not be quoted or cited without my permission.

² p. 399 in "Thoreau," in Larzer Ziff's edition of *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982). I wonder what Emerson made of a February 21, 1842 entry in Thoreau's journal: "I must confess there is nothing so strange to me as my own body. I love any other piece of nature, almost, better." Thoreau says a page later that "my soul and body have tottered along together of late, tripping and hindering one another like unpracticed Siamese twins. They two should walk as one, that no obstacle may be nearer than the firmament" (*The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, edited by Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906], 14 volumes, volume 1, pp. 321, 322).

³ I've decided not to count the time he set fire to the Walden woods.

⁴ To our ears, it's a bit strange to speak of an idealist as "abstract"—and there is a long tradition, stretching at least from Berkeley to Borden Parker Bowne, criticizing materialism for its abstractions. But in Emerson's prose, the words "abstractionist" and "idealist" are virtually interchangeable. In "Montaigne," in a passage that (like with the one from "The Transcendentalist" I quoted in Lecture I) carries on Plato's battle of the gods and giants, Emerson lines up "the abstractionist" against "the materialist," each one "mutually exasperating" the other (p. 693 in the Library of America edition of Emerson's essays). Here, though, "a third party" enters the picture, "to occupy the middle ground between these two"—the skeptic.

⁵ I will be using Walter Harding's annotated edition of *Walden* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995). The passage quoted appears on p. 314, but henceforth, instead of giving page numbers, I'll follow the universal reference system introduced by Stanley Cavell in *The Senses of Walden*, expanded edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). This passage is XVIII, 4: chapter 18 ("Conclusion"), fourth paragraph.

⁶ Emerson too has been read as a purely ethical idealist, for example by Joel Porte in his *Representative Man: Ralph Waldo Emerson in His Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

⁷ The attention Berkeley and Edwards give to nature is, however, the attention of a spectator. Thoreau isn't a spectator upon the world but an embodied agent within it.

⁸ *Journal*, edited by Torrey and Allen, volume 5, p. 459.

⁹ I'm borrowing here from a letter by Josiah Royce, in which this paradoxical desire is expressed.

¹⁰ Although it takes a very different verbal form, Hugo Münsterberg's definition of idealism (in *Science and Idealism* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906], also quoted in Lecture I) is, in intention, the same as Falckenberg's. Emerson, Münsterberg writes, was no "technical scholar, but no one stood more warmly, more luminously, more wholeheartedly for the deepest convictions of idealistic philosophy: he believed in the freedom of man and in the absolute value of man's ideals" (p. 6). To believe in human freedom is to believe we are not always at the mercy of sensual and selfish impulses (Falckenberg's psychological thesis); to affirm the absolute value of our ideals is to acknowledge that the other ends we sometimes serve are superior to the sensual or selfish (Falckenberg's normative thesis).

¹¹ In Lecture I we saw arguments leading from an austere conception of body (a conception according to which body is inactive, for example) to existence of something other than body. What we have here is an argument leading from an austere conception of human psychology to the existence of something not recognized by that psychology, or by the naturalist metaphysics that underlies it.

¹² Does this mean that there may be, despite what I seem to suggest later in the lecture, a ceiling to our perfectibility?

¹³ I'm not suggesting that "Economy" is just a Thoreauvian synonym for "Commodity." "Economy" carries tones or colors that "Commodity" lacks, among them the suggestion that we should be "economizing," or simplifying our lives. Economy is thrift or frugality.

¹⁴ On Thoreau's myth-making aspirations see the following journal entry, from November 8, 1851: "I, too, would fain set down something besides facts. Facts should only be as the frame to my pictures; they should be material to the mythology which I am writing; not facts to assist men to make money, farmers to farm profitably, in any common sense; facts to tell who I am, and where I have been or what I have thought: as now the bell rings for evening meeting, and its volumes of sounds, like smoke which rises from where a cannon is fired, make the tent in which I dwell. My facts shall be falsehoods in the common sense. I would so state facts that they shall be significant, shall be myths or mythologic." Another useful entry is quoted by Robert Richardson, *Henry David Thoreau*, p. 251: "A fact truly and absolutely stated is taken out of the region of common sense and acquires a mythologic or universal significance . . . Express it without expressing yourself." In other places Thoreau nonetheless insists that self-expression is the only mode of expression possible for us.

¹⁵ On the myth of Adam see for example *The Maine Woods*, p. 602: where land costs nothing and houses only the labor of building, the emigrant "may begin life as Adam did." For some musings on Walden at the time of Adam and Eve's expulsion see "The Ponds," (IX, 8).

¹⁶ The distinction between necessities and superfluities raises interesting questions I can't pursue. Thoreau also speaks of "luxuries" and "comforts." Some of those comforts are "next to necessities," and crucial ingredients of the writer's life he lived at Walden, though the book doesn't often acknowledge them. "At the present day, and in this country, as I find by my own experience, a few implements, a knife, and axe, a spade, a wheelbarrow, etc., and for the studious, lamplight, stationery, and access to a few books, rank next to necessities, and [he is careful to add, so the lower hypothesis will not be disturbed] call all be obtained at a trifling cost" (I, 18, my emphasis).

As Cavell observes, hoeing stands in for reading and writing. "After hoeing, or perhaps reading and writing, in the forenoon" "The Village" begins, "I usually bathed against in the pond, swimming across one of its coves for a stint, and washed the dust of labor from my person, or smoothed out the last wrinkle which study had made, and for the afternoon was absolutely free" (IX, 1).

¹⁷ When Thoreau says "there is a solid bottom everywhere," he's suggesting that nature is always guided by sufficient reasons. (It's worth recalling the story of the man, about to drive his horse and cart across a river, who asked a nearby boy whether its bottom was solid. The boy answered yes and the man went ahead, but the horse and cart were sucked in by the mud. *You said it had a solid bottom*, the man objected. *Oh, it does*, said the boy. *You just haven't reached it yet.*) To live as deliberately as nature is to be guided by sufficient reasons. We can get at those reasons by "fronting" facts, and by reducing life to its "lowest terms."

¹⁸ I may want to add something about the difficulty of extracting pat lessons from *Walden*. There are two reasons for this. The first and more basic difficulty is that force is inevitably lost when these lessons are lifted out of their contexts. The second is Thoreau's admitted obscurity (see pp. 16 ("You will pardon some obscurities"), 352 (anticipating the charge of obscurity), and 353 (replying that obscurity wasn't aimed at) in the Princeton University Press edition of *Walden*). Emerson has a nice comment on this in his eulogy, triggered as I recall by the figure of the hound, the bay horse, and the turtle-dove (p. 409 in the Ziff anthology): "His riddles were worth the reading, and I confide that if at any time I do not understand the expression it is yet just."

¹⁹ For Emerson, the fall is more serious than it seems to be for Thoreau. Could its importance for Emerson have to do with his idealist metaphysics—with his belief that infinite spirit necessarily publishes itself in creatures? (Thoreau agrees what we're broken or degenerate, but he's speaking ethically rather than metaphysically. He does think in Biblical terms—he's hoping to restore us to the innocence of Adam—but he isn't serious about providing Biblical doctrines with metaphysical backing. I don't think he's serious about the Biblical doctrines (the fall, for example) or about associated philosophical doctrines (Neo-Platonic theories of lapse or emanation, say).

²⁰ Thoreau often mentions God (as in II, 21, "God himself culminates in the present moment"), but I agree with Joel Porte that he is a "dangerous heretic."

²¹ I believe that there is further evidence for what I say about faith in Thoreau's review of J. A. Etzler, *The Paradise within the Reach of All Men, without Labor, by Powers of Nature and Machinery* (Pittsburgh: Etzler and Reinhold, 1833). "Surely [Etzler argues], all the gross necessities and economies might be cared for in a few years" (p. 129 in the Library of America edition of Thoreau's essays and poems). "Thus [by technological means, by harnessing the powers of nature] is Paradise to be Regained, and that old and stern decree at length reversed" (p. 131). "The chief fault of this book is, that it aims to secure the greatest degree of gross comfort and pleasure merely" (p. 136). "This is the crying sin of the age, this want of faith in the prevalence of a man" (p. 133). We have no faith that we have higher ends, and the capacity to achieve them. Faith will always be necessary because the positive findings of experience are only partial, suggestive rather than definitive. The induction from past to future calls for "transcendental" thinking.

²² This entry is from June 6, 1851. I need to say more about "transcendental" induction. It's more infirm than the ordinary, "common sense" induction that confirms the lower hypothesis. In the

ordinary case, we can raise questions about the representativeness of his sample. We might even raise the problem of induction. Imagine we put all these concerns to rest. Our sample is representative. The future will be like the past. The transcendental induction remains suspect, because it invites us to expect a future *unlike* the past. (Thoreau's decision to live at Walden Pond was an attempt to insure the representativeness of his sample. He reports that for several years, quite apart from his experiment, six weeks of manual labor were enough to meet his yearly needs. But he was living in the town of his birth. He had a house. He had friends and connections. By uprooting himself he becomes a purer, more ideal case, but also a more representative one. Here it may be worth considering the role played by idealization in, say Plato's *Republic*. Even if an ideal can't be precisely realized, it can still serve as a model.)

²³ With this sort of proof there is always a need for faith. Thus Thoreau writes that he is convinced "both by faith and experience, that to maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime" (I, 98).

²⁴ Although Thoreau doesn't say this directly, I believe it's true that as we simplify our lives, two things happen. First, moral laws assume more importance for us. We're able to dwell on their demands and take them more to heart. Second, the laws seem easier to satisfy. We can imagine having the time and energy to meet their demands. In that way, they become more "liberal," or more generous, at the same time they become more urgent.

²⁵ I'm also inclined to say that the idealism of "Civil Disobedience" is "political, not metaphysical." If I don't get to this paper this afternoon, I hope to say something about it in Lecture VI.

²⁶ An objection: what about such pronouncements as "time is but a stream I go a-fishing in" (II, 23)—and, moreover, a "shallow" one? This is Time's Subordination to Eternity, but it is, in Thoreau's hands, a judgment of value: the judgment that no moment has more value than any other, and that truest human ends are indifferent to time's passage. See II, 21 and V, 6 for Thoreau's best statements of the thought (see also *A Week*, p. 255), as well as Emerson's remarks in the opening pages of his eulogy. In much the same way, when Thoreau says in *A Week* (p. 104) that to one who contemplates the truth, the political state hardly has existence, he is commenting on the importance of the ends it serves, not on its metaphysical reality. I hope I can say more about this in Lecture VI, in connection with "Civil Disobedience" and its influence on Martin Luther King.

²⁷ In her book *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Science, and Gender in New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), p. 257.

²⁸ I can't deny, though, that there are anthropocentric sentiments expressed in places. See for example p. 284 of *A Week*: "The universe is a sphere whose centre is wherever there is intelligence. The sun is not so central as a man." See also p. 270: "let us wander where we will, the universe is built round about us, and we are central still." Then there is the passage, emphasized by Cavell, on the world's obedience to our conceptions. Cavell gives this a Kantian reading, but the proper reading may be more Leibnizian. So much is suggested, at any rate, by pp. 239 and 240.

²⁹ In the paragraphs that follow I am very much indebted to conversations of many years ago with Michael Cooper.

³⁰ I'm surprised by Walter Harding's suggestion that the verses round out "a one-sided view of things" (p. 77 in his edition of *Walden*). In "Downwardly Mobile for Conscience Sake: Voluntary Simplicity from Thoreau to Lily Bart" (*American Literary History* 17 (2005), pp. 653-65) Lawrence Buell takes the sense of opposition or correction farther, suggesting that the verses are quoted in "self-parody" (p. 662). I don't see parody but reinforcement. Thoreau supposes, I think, that the voice of the poet is entirely on his side. For readings closer in spirit to mine see Thomas Woodson, "Thoreau on Poverty and Magnanimity," *PMLA* 85 (1970), pp. 21-34, and Robin Grey, *The Complicity of Imagination: The American Renaissance, Contests of Authority, and 17th Century English Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 133-41.

³¹ Yet he says in the first paragraph of "Higher Laws" that he loves the wild as well as the good, the primitive or savage in him no less than the higher or spiritual (XI, 1). "I reverence them both," he says. I'm not sure what do make of this.

³² Quoted in Robert Richardson, *Henry David Thoreau*, p. 267.

³³ Also quoted in Richardson, p. 349.

³⁴ The theme of this paragraph is addressed humorously in "Brute Neighbors," in a dialogue between Hermit and Poet. "Shall I go to heaven or a-fishing," asks the Hermit (XII, 5). "If I should soon bring this meditation to an end, would another so sweet occasion likely to offer? I was as near being resolved into the essence of things as I ever was in my life."

³⁵ I should try connecting this passage to Thoreau's commentary on his "doubleness" at V, 11. I should also consider VIII 1, on automatic walking and estrangement from the world.

³⁶ What we have here is neither monism nor pantheism, but dualism. There is no idealist sublimation.

³⁷ The sort of backing I'm imagining is roughly this: spirit *intended* that nature should impart this lesson, and somehow arranged for it to do so.

³⁸ Just before delivering the lecture I was reminded of what Frank Ramsey says in a paper he gave to the Apostles: "I don't feel the least humble before the vastness of the heavens. The stars may be large, but they cannot think or love." It would also be interesting to consider this in the light of Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature*.