

Ralph Waldo Emerson Analytic Essay

In his essay "Self-Reliance," Ralph Waldo Emerson argues: "With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do." Emerson takes on the traditional glorification of consistency and argues that to carry out past action or thought consistently is only to wall off any possibility of real personal growth and greatness. Emerson's claim is valid, since flexibility in thinking is very important for intellectual development, as historical and modern examples show that greatness many times consists of the transformation from the previously held ideas and actions.

Emerson's line of argument, that consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, is embedded in his wider philosophy of self-reliance, through which he defends the significance of intuition by the individual and personal evolution. He writes, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines." In this excerpt, Emerson is pointing to the trait of consistency in holding on to opinions or actions as a sort of shallowness of the intellect. Once you let go of past beliefs, one can answer more truly to present experience and insight. For instance, Emerson extols the virtue of being able to change one's mind and expresses that each new day must be met with a clear view, free from previous commitments. This is real freedom of self-expression and self-actualization, for no one can be confined to their views in the past but will rather move forward to gain new understanding and chances.

Historical and modern-day figures of great accomplishment usually illustrate the principle of Emerson in that they grow beyond what their previous convictions and actions may have been. A good example is that of Mahatma Gandhi, whose philosophy and methodology for resistance were significantly different than his early years, when he was a fervent supporter of the British Empire and attempted reform through conciliation with the ruling colonial empire. However, as he learned more, he gradually changed to support full

independence through nonviolent resistance. Gandhi was very flexible in his beliefs and ways of thinking, which was another reason he was a great leader. This transformation is known as one of Emerson's traits of greatness: that someone great is always willing to let go of consistency for the sake of development and change. Similarly, in the area of science, Albert Einstein's development of the theory of relativity required him to move beyond the classical Newtonian physics he initially studied. By embracing new, radical ideas, Einstein revolutionized our understanding of the universe, demonstrating that intellectual greatness often requires breaking free from established patterns of thought.

In conclusion, the statement by Emerson that "with consistency, a great soul has simply nothing to do" helps in re-emphasizing the essence of flexibility, intellectually and personally, on the road to real greatness. But then, it is his own work, along with biographies of great men from Gandhi to Einstein, that shows the way to real greatness—a zigzag line of continual growth and adaptation. One can only achieve the best they can be and contribute meaningfully to their world by embracing change and being receptive to new insights.

Works Cited

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