

# Experience

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“EXPERIENCE” should be a keyword in Victorian studies. It provides a corrective to our focus on enduring categories of mental life: consciousness, memory, affect. The conceptual edges of experience were more porous than those of related Victorian terms of human being, including “consciousness” and “sensation,” in that it extended beyond the mental to include the environment or object-world in which persons find themselves. The Victorian philosopher Shadworth Hodgson defined it as “this mass of feelings, perceptions, and thoughts. . . whereby we seem to exist as Persons, *in a world of Persons and Things, Actions and Events.*”<sup>1</sup> Experience was understood to be the feeling of living, the sense of having truly been present, either taking place in the present tense or having a quality of ongoingness. In this regard, it was expressly distinct from memory, though, crucially, it referred to the way a feeling of living in a certain way builds up over time, so it becomes yours. In this respect, it could be acquired, stockpiled, learned from, fallen back on as a source of authority.<sup>2</sup> It had not only a temporal but also a spatial dimension—happening here rather than there—and yet often on the move. For all these reasons, experience could feel both elusive and aspirational.

From the middle of the nineteenth century through the first decades of the twentieth, “experience” became a fashionable concept, of urgent interest to writers and readers across many fields and genres of writing. Blunt measuring sticks documenting the spike in experience-fever can be found in digital searches of corpora of British English printed texts between 1800 and 1900: all demonstrate an upswing, with particular peaks of usage in the last few decades of the century.<sup>3</sup> Remarkable is not only the sheer volume of books and articles that contain “experience” in their titles but also the diversity and range of topics the publications appear to address. Many are autobiographies, such as the Anglo-American reformer Georgiana Bruce Kirby’s ultra-blandly

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titled *Years of Experience: An Autobiographical Narrative* (1887), narrower accounts such as “The Musical Experiences of a Pianoforte Student” (Bettina Walker, 1893), or claims of firsthand knowledge: *Eight Months’ Experience of the Sepoy Revolt* (Sir Charles D’Oyly, 1891). Most striking is the swelling of publications that address experience as a matter of urgent religious or philosophical importance. Many among this group were written by clergy and theologians, such as William Newbolt’s *The Gospel of Experience* and Wilfrid John Richmond’s *Experience: A Chapter of Prolegomena*, both by Anglicans and published in 1896.

Why this spike of writing about experience? As a basic way of thinking about human life, experience got caught up in the great division and professionalization of the disciplines in late Victorian intellectual life, as the later nineteenth century saw the birth of many of the fields of the human sciences in their modern forms. In this increasingly divided terrain, the object of the human sciences became the distinct “varieties” (to use William James’s term) of experience. “Experience” titles multiplied because it seemed possible to think about religious experience, as distinct from musical experience, as distinct from, say, educational experience, each studied through the lens of an emerging discipline.

But most essential to the mushrooming of experience-talk toward the end of the century was the concept’s prominence in the schools of philosophy that came to dominate the philosophical airwaves. It was in part a result of the rise of idealism in British philosophy. While the uneasy assimilation of Platonism as well as German idealist philosophy in Britain has a long and tortured history, idealism flourished in Victorian Britain. The Victorian idealists also saw themselves as correcting the methodological and metaphysical errors of the fundamentally empiricist way of thinking about experience that dominated British science and philosophy. In taking individual, observed experience of the natural world as the basis for all knowledge, the empiricist tradition had produced (in the idealists’ view) an atomized, fragmented world of multiple experiences. Victorian idealists such as T. H. Green and F. H. Bradley strove for “Absolute Experience” (capital A, capital E): a total, authentic experience that overcomes the divide between subject and object.

The most astounding monument of Victorian experience-talk is Shadworth Hodgson’s massive, four-volume *The Metaphysic of Experience* (1898). In it, he sought to nudge the concept of “experience” toward something more subjective, comprehensive, and phenomenological. In Hodgson’s analysis, experience is truly present only as a momentary

thickening as it is on its way past us. In his discussion of the relationship between experience and time (“time and feeling together are experience,” he declares [1:65]), what he called “the empirical present” is always carved up into two sections, a part felt as coming or growing stronger, and a part felt as receding or growing fainter. Our actual experience of the empirical present is weighted toward the latter. Each moment of present experience is only really experienced insofar as it is immediately transferred into a “retained object,” as what Hodgson called the “whatness” of a moment of experience occurring in real time is transitioned into its “thatness”: the form in which it is grasped in retrospect. As the bulk of *The Metaphysic of Experience* goes on to experiment with what gets included in, and excluded from, “actually present experience” (1:38), you feel the fullness of experience slipping away, not “actually” existing, but existing if at all only on the thin pages of this thick book. However, questions about whether experience feels like it is happening now or just past, or deferred to some future point—and whether it inheres in books or in life—tend to feel like urgent questions to all bookish people, who may worry that their experience of reality is highly mediated, displaced, or deferred.

Hodgson’s massive book can serve as an invitation to study further how Victorian writers parsed the bookish as well as the ephemeral nature of experience, the fine lines among vicarious, literary, and lived experience, between someone else’s experience and your own.<sup>4</sup> At a moment like ours, in which urgent claims to honor the lived experience of others collide with excitement about technologies of virtual experience, looking into the history of this concept seems newly pressing. What can Victorian writers tell us about the conditions under which experience pulses out as a vivid, felt thing?

#### NOTES

1. Shadworth Hollway Hodgson, *The Metaphysic of Experience* (London: Longman, Green, 1898) 1:16, 34 (emphasis mine). All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
2. In his own keyword entry on “experience,” Raymond Williams wrote about the complex relationship between what he called “experience past” and “experience present,” and about the ways in which experience can slip between being grounds for the most authentic truths to evidence of our condition; *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and*

*Society*, new ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 83–85. Essential reading on the history of the term is Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

3. Digital searches revealing an increasing percentage of published materials in English with the word “experience” in the title, as well as an increase in sheer numbers of “experience” titles, from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth, can be done using the following corpora: Google Books Ngram Viewer, Gale Primary Sources: Nineteenth-Century Collections Online, and C19: The Nineteenth-Century Index.
4. These are the topics of my forthcoming book, *The Location of Experience: Victorian Women Writers, the Novel, and the Feeling of Living*. Other recent turns to experience in Victorian studies and studies of the novel include John Plotz, *Semi-Detached: The Aesthetics of Virtual Experience Since Dickens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Yi-Ping Ong’s existentialist discussion of the conditions under which novels “grip” readers in the grasp of a fictional “lived experience,” in *The Art of Being: Poetics of the Novel and Existentialist Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 67; and Rita Felski’s turn to experience, most recently in *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020). In philosophy, recent reexaminations of experience include Cressida Heyes, *Anaesthetics of Existence: Essays on Experience at the Edge* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

