

the review of
metaphysics

a philosophical quarterly

Emerson's Transcendentalist Individualism as a Social Philosophy

Author(s): Joseph L. Blau

Source: *The Review of Metaphysics*, Sep., 1977, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Sep., 1977), pp. 80-92

Published by: Philosophy Education Society Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20127018>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Philosophy Education Society Inc. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Review of Metaphysics*

JSTOR

EMERSON'S TRANSCENDENTALIST INDIVIDUALISM AS A SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

JOSEPH L. BLAU

MUCH of the attention of recent students of American philosophy has been concentrated on the study of philosophers and ways of doing philosophy in the post-Civil War era. It is understandable that this should be so, for the problems of late nineteenth and twentieth century thought are still alive, still perplexing, in our own attempts at philosophic understanding. There is much, however, that is overlooked by narrowing our focus to what Max Fisch and his associates described as "classic" American philosophy, and to our own post-classic era. It may well be that some aspects of the earlier and now unfashionable philosophies and philosophers can still have resonance in our thinking if only we are willing to give these older philosophies a hearing. For this reason, this present study explores the philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson and reexamines his thought at the point where, it seems to me, it is still viable today, namely as a social philosophy for a society, like our own, hopelessly committed to an extreme individualism.

I

The key term with which to begin our examination, if we are to understand the increasingly social thrust of Emerson's transcendentalist individualism, is "self-reliance." Unfortunately this expression has come to be used in a sense very different from that which Emerson intended. As a result, he is too often regarded as a high-grade literary apologist for the *status quo*. An instant corrective is available to those who have read the tribute that Wendell Phillips paid him, calling him "the earthquake scholar at Concord, whose serene word, like a whisper among the avalanches, topples down superstitions and prejudices."¹ Self-reliance, for Emerson, bore no relation to what came to be called "rugged individualism."

¹ Wendell Phillips, "The Scholar in a Republic," reprinted in *American Philosophic Addresses, 1700-1900*, (ed.) J. L. Blau (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946), p. 276.

Yet Emerson's essay on "Self-Reliance" is treated, when it is mentioned at all, as if it were a high-flown *apologia* for the Carnegies, the Rockefellers, and the Harrimans of the late nineteenth-century age of the robber barons. Indeed, quite to the contrary, self-reliance is the very pivot on which Emerson's individualism transforms itself into a social philosophy of altruism.

The germ of what was to become Emerson's intuition of self-reliance may be found in a letter to his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, dated August 17, 1827, when the young minister was only twenty-four years of age. Like most of his other letters to this favorite correspondent, the letter in question ranges widely in its themes. The relevant passage (quoted in full in the note below) reads in part, "A portion of truth, bright and sublime, lives in every moment to every man."² Again, in 1832, when Emerson had to face the question whether he was to remain in the ministry or resign his charge, he wrote in his *Journal*, "I would be the vehicle of that divine principle that lurks within, and of which life has afforded only glimpses enough to assure me of its being."³ After his decision to resign his ministry and the breakdown that followed this decision, while on his way to Europe, in 1833, for what, it was hoped, would be a restoration to health, he wrote the words that finally became his central message as well as furnishing him with his primary intellectual method:

Henceforth, please God, forever I forego
The yoke of men's opinions. I will be
Light-hearted as a bird, and live with God.

² "I preach half of every Sunday. When I attended church on the other half of a Sunday, and the image in the pulpit was all of clay, and not of tunable metal, I said to myself that if men would avoid that general language and general manner in which they strive to hide all that is peculiar, and would say only what was uppermost in their own minds, after their own individual manner, every man would be interesting. Every man is a new creation, can do something best, has some intellectual modes and forms, or a character the general result of all, such as no other agent in the universe has: if he would exhibit that, it must needs be engaging, must be a curious study to every inquisitive mind. But whatever properties a man of narrow intellect feels to be peculiar he studiously hides; he is ashamed or afraid of himself, and all his communications to men are unskilful plagiarisms from the common stock of thought and knowledge, and he is of course flat and tiresome. . . . A portion of truth, bright and sublime, lives in every moment to every man." Quoted in James Elliot Cabot, *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, I (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1877), pp. 133–134.

³ Entry of 14 July, 1832; as quoted in Cabot, *Memoir*, I, p. 156.

I find him in the bottom of my heart,
I hear continually his voice therein.⁴

This was the message that Emerson taught others in his books and from lecture platforms for the rest of his life.

Never a doctrine, ever a method, in his hands self-reliance became an instrument of great sensitivity and enormous vitality. What he had found in the healing process of finding himself was the conviction that any person who honestly examines his own mind and his own heart and carries the examination out to its utmost limits will arrive at conclusions that are not particular, self-centered, and limited, but are universal and applicable to all of humankind. He conceived the method of self-reliance as an individual, immediate raid on ultimate, universal truth. Thought, intuitive thought, does not have to be directed toward the outer world of things to be universal; it can be directed toward the innermost world of the individual self. But in striving to reach this innermost self or soul, the individual transcends himself (herself). It is no longer his (her) finiteness that speaks the word universal, but the spark of the infinite that lies within each one. Thus Emerson's individualism was transcendentalist; it found the universal within the individual, but in the discovery it forced the individual beyond individuality to universality. The principle of self-reliance is that of respecting the guidance of the ultimate introspection gained by this transcendentalist searching.

The method of self-reliance, as Emerson practised it, superseded discursive argumentation. He was entirely honest when he answered Henry Ware's request for his arguments in support of the position he espoused in the "Divinity School Address" of 1838 with the comment that he had no "arguments"—that he did not "know what arguments mean in reference to any expression of a thought."⁵ Emerson was sincere in his belief that any user of the method of transcendentalist introspection is the spiritual representative of the entire human race. The truly "representative men" are not chosen by the people's voice and suffrage. They are self-chosen by virtue of their devoted following of the universal voice within their breasts.

⁴ Quoted by Stuart P. Sherman in the "Introduction" to his edition of *Essays and Poems of Emerson* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1921), p. xx.

⁵ R. W. Emerson to Henry Ware, Concord, October 8, 1838; text as given in Cabot, *Memoir*, II, p. 693.

Emerson expressed this central insight variously in his writings. Sometimes he spoke in mystical language, easy to reject as bathos, as in the passage in his *Nature* of 1836, so cruelly and wittily caricatured by his friend Christopher P. Cranch: "Standing on the bare ground, my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me."⁶ At other times, he talked in mythological terms, as in the Swedenborgian fable of the "greater man" at the beginning of his Harvard Phi Beta Kappa address of 1837, "The American Scholar."⁷ At still other times, as in the essay on "Self-Reliance," Emerson tried to express his view in terms that might be understood by all, only to fall into the pit of being misunderstood by all—or almost all. For it is only in a transcendentalist sense that self-reliance can be translated as individualism. Emerson's "self-reliance" is misinterpreted and misrepresented as laissez-faire. What we want, he said, is "men of original perception and original action, who can open their eyes wider than to a nationality,"⁸ and we may add *a fortiori* wider than to an individuality.

II

When Emerson combined his transcendental view of the individual as the carrier of universal truth with the relics of his traditional Christian view of the dignity of the individual as the child of God, and with his American democratic heritage of the worth of the individual as a co-equal partner in society, he produced perhaps the most thoroughgoing humanism that has ever been presented. Nowhere is this clearer than in his volume of sketches called *Representative Men*.⁹ The men "profiled" by Emerson in this volume were

⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, (ed.) J. L. Blau (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1948), p. 4; see also F. DeWolfe Miller, *Christopher Pearse Cranch and his Caricatures . . .* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1951), plate 3.

⁷ Reprinted in J. L. Blau (ed.), *American Philosophic Addresses*, pp. 153–170; the fable on p. 154.

⁸ *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, The Concord Edition (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., various dates), XI, p. 282. All subsequent references to Emerson's Works will be to this edition, unless otherwise specified, and will be given by Volume and pages.

⁹ The full text is given in *Works*, Volume IV.

all very unusual people of special talents and abilities whose achievements made history. They are not “representative” in the usual sense of “typical samples.” Rather they are representative of the highest quality of human success, representative of the utmost that human beings have been able to achieve; representative, then, of what humankind could ideally become rather than of what humankind now is. It is worthy of notice that Emerson began the volume with a chapter called “Uses of Great Men,” where he suggested that it is through the great that we can learn about ourselves, through the unusual that we can discover the potential of the ordinary.

In our usual self-centered fashion, we all tend to regard ourselves as always of a superior rightness; we “chuckle and triumph” in our opinion “over the absurdities of all the rest. Difference from me is the measure of absurdity. Not one has a misgiving of being wrong.” While we engage in “this chuckle of self-gratulation,” a truly representative person appears and thus aids us to overcome our petty self-centering. “Without Plato we should almost lose our faith in the possibility of a reasonable book.” The great serve “to clear our eyes from egotism, and enable us to see other people and their works.”

As to what we call the masses, and common men—there are no common men. All men are at last of a size; and true art is only possible on the conviction that every talent has its apotheosis somewhere. . . . But heaven reserves an equal scope for every creature. Each is uneasy until he has produced his private ray unto the concave sphere and beheld his talent also in its last nobility and exaltation.¹⁰

Again and again Emerson points to the idea that there is progress, not in the inevitable way that the optimists of the Enlightenment anticipated, nor yet in the merely biological sense of the Evolutionists who were still to come, but in a moral sense. “The reputations of the nineteenth century will one day be quoted to prove its barbarism.” This progress is not of the individual’s own doing, but of the entire human race. “The genius of humanity is the real subject whose biography is written in our annals.” The essence of the progress of humanity is not to be found in the study of the life of any single person, however famous. At most, the individual merely serves as “an exhibition, in some quarter, of new possibilities” for the whole of humanity. The deeper we probe into the lives of individuals the

¹⁰ *Works*, IV, pp. 25, 31–32.

closer we come to that "elemental region wherein the individual is lost." Ultimately, insofar as the conditions can be equalized for every person, "within the limits of human education and agency," the greatest people are those whose unique qualities enable their influence and effect to spread most widely.¹¹

From these summaries, and the quotations from Emerson's own writing that have been included, it is plain that Emerson's kind of individualism did not issue in any sort of egotism, whether of the spiritual or the material economy. He recognized that the human being is a social being. Indeed, he considered that without rooting in society any person is lost. People are nothing except in relation to other people, and yet, in his sense, the essential human being is the private self. What seems paradoxical in the apposition of these two ideas is resolved, in Emerson's thought, by the belief that the private self does not exist for itself, but for the contribution that it can make to the human race. "I must have a social state and history," he wrote in *The Conduct of Life*, "or my thinking and speaking want body and basis. But to give these accessories any value, I must know them as contingent and rather showy possessions, which pass for more to the people than to me."¹² In this alternation back and forth between the sense of individuality and the sense of common humanity lies one of the most distinctive and most difficult of the Emersonian concepts. Once the position is stated, however, it can be recognized as a most appealing view for many people who wish to retain a grip on their own uniqueness and, at the same time, to hold fast to a sense of human solidarity.

III

Emerson has frequently been dismissed as a man who was not interested in politics. The statement is correct if the term be limited in meaning to the politics of parties and elections. But it is certainly incorrect to regard Emerson as non-political. It is true that he was by temperament not an activist, on most issues. During the slavery controversy, however, he was one of the handful of intellectuals who early took a firm stand. This accounts for the

¹¹ *Works*, IV, pp. 32–33, 35.

¹² *Works*, VI, p. 158.

high praise he won from Wendell Phillips. Emerson took a moral position on the slavery issue. He spoke of the North and the South as two different levels of civilization, one democratic, the other oligarchic, which Americans have tried to hold together under a single law. This attempt had failed, he asserted, because the earlier state of society poisoned the later stage, “has poisoned politics, public morals and social intercourse in the Republic, now for many years.” The time had arrived, he thought, to make the effort to extend the better state of society throughout the entire country. On moral grounds he set himself against the Gresham-like law that had been the rule in American political life, that the evil in circulation will inevitably triumph over the good. “Our whole history,” he proclaimed, “appears like a last effort of the Divine Providence in behalf of the human race; and a literal, slavish following of precedents, as by a Justice of the peace, is not for those who at this hour lead the destinies of this people.”¹³

Emerson refused to make his case against slavery on anything less than this moral ground. He dismissed scornfully the attempt to oppose slavery for economic reasons.

To what purpose make more big books of these statistics? There are already mountains of facts, if any one wants them. But people do not want them. They bring their opinion into the world. If they have a comatose tendency in the brain, they are pro-slavery while they live; if of a nervous sanguineous temperament, they are abolitionists. Can you convince the shoe interest, or the iron interest, or the cotton interest, by reading passages from Milton or Montesquieu?¹⁴

The Emerson who wrote these words is seldom spoken of today. We have forgotten the man of vision and courage. We concentrate our studies on the biteless passages, or those that have lost their bite, and then announce triumphantly that Emerson was toothless. He saw the slavery question as a political question as the great philosophers have always seen politics, as an aspect of man’s quest for the fulfillment of humanity. His was a transcendental politics that could be carried on only by transcendental politicians—in the language of Plato, by philosopher-kings, “who can open their eyes wider than to a nationality, namely, to considerations of benefit to the human race, can act in the interest of civilization.”¹⁵

¹³ *Works*, XI, pp. 278–279.

¹⁴ *Works*, XI, p. 280.

¹⁵ *Works*, XI, p. 282.

Emerson lived at a time close enough to the foundation of the United States in a war of revolution that he lacked the fear of revolutionary action that has prevailed in America in more recent times. "I wish," he declared, "I saw in the people that inspiration which, if government would not obey the same, would leave the government behind and create on the moment the means and executors it wanted."¹⁶ Surely the man who uttered these words was not of the Jacksonian party, and yet he was at home with the ideas of the Jacksonians in many ways. When he was still at the threshold of his new career as secular preacher and conscience of the American people, Emerson delivered at Boston, in 1839–1840, a series of lectures under the title, "The Present Age." Theodore Parker reported to Dr. Convers Francis that "It was *Democratic-Loconfoco* throughout. . . . Bancroft was in ecstasies. . . . One grave, Whig-looking gentleman . . . said he could only account for his delivering such a lecture on the supposition that he wished to get a place in the Custom-House under George Bancroft."¹⁷

There are a number of passages in Emerson's addresses and essays that have a Jacksonian tinge. So, for example, he commented on "free trade, certainly the interest of nations," and added, "Banknotes rob the public, but are such a daily convenience that we silence our scruples and make believe they are gold."¹⁸ Nowhere does he sound more like a Jacksonian Democrat than in his glorification of labor: "There is no interest in any country so imperative as that of labor; it covers all, the constitutions and governments exist for that—to protect and insure it to the laborer."¹⁹ Despite such tendencies in his thought, his personal heroes among the Americans of the New England in which he lived were men who were politically affiliated with the Whig party. In one comment he suggested that, of the two parties, one had a monopoly on good causes, the other on good men²⁰—and so he joined no party.

In most respects, Emerson's views were those of the political liberals of the late eighteenth century. He did, however, go beyond his immediate models in the degree to which he introduced a moral

¹⁶ *Works*, XI, p. 282.

¹⁷ Cabot, *Memoir*, II, pp. 400–401.

¹⁸ *Works*, XI, p. 281.

¹⁹ *Works*, XI, p. 278.

²⁰ *Works*, III, p. 209.

emphasis in his political thought. In a passage that, for him, was unusually specific, he wrote:

The end of all political struggle is to establish morality as the basis of all legislation. It is not free institutions, it is not a republic, it is not a democracy, that is the end—no, but only the means. Morality is the object of government . . . the government of the world is moral. . . .²¹

Legislation, governments, parties are all local and temporary. For every stage in the cultural development of the people of a territory, a different form of government may be both desirable and necessary. “The law is only a memorandum,” but the grand and overarching principles of politics are eternal.²²

Basic to Emerson’s conception of the principles that apply is the notion that governments exist for the dual, though often conflicting, interest of the protection of persons and of property. The interest of persons requires the form of a democracy founded on equal rights. The interest of property calls for a form of government grounded in inequality. “Personal rights, universally the same, demand a government framed on the ratio of the census; property demands a government framed on the ratio of owners and owning.”²³ The generally accepted principle of older times was that proprietors should have a larger role in the franchise than non-proprietors, but this view no longer seems self-evident. The newer tendency is to regard the interest of persons as “truly the only interest for the consideration of the State”:

that property will always follow persons; that the highest end of the government is the culture of men; and that if men can be educated, the institutions will share their improvement and the moral sentiment will write the law of the land.²⁴

Emerson’s politics, it is clear from these examples, both early in his life and late, is more a social philosophy than, in a strict sense, a political theory.

Two points must never be forgotten if we are to give Emerson his due as a social philosopher and not merely a phenomenon of the emergence of the “celebrity” in nineteenth-century America. The first is that, however advanced the current form of government in

²¹ *Works*, XI, pp. 288–289.

²² *Works*, III, p. 192.

²³ *Works*, III, pp. 201–202.

²⁴ *Works*, III, p. 204.

any country may seem to be, in the larger view it always represents a cultural lag. "The history of the State sketches in coarse outline the progress of thought, and follows at a distance the delicacy of culture, and of aspiration."²⁵ Political arrangements, even when claimed by their sponsors as "progressive," are always behindhand. The second point to keep in mind is that Emerson realized that his fellow Americans had to beware of the all-too-human tendency to universalize their conception of the value of the institutional arrangements that satisfy them.

In this country we are very vain of our political institutions, which are singular in this, that they sprung, within the memory of living men, from the character and conditions of the people, which they still express with sufficient fidelity—and we ostentatiously prefer them to any other in history. They are not better, but only fitter for us.²⁶

No, Ralph Waldo Emerson was not, in any way, provincial. He spoke to, and for, all the world, not merely to and for the New England heritage that he adorned or the American heritage that his essays carried to cultured circles both in the British Isles and in Continental Europe.

IV

The neo-Platonic conception of the spark of the divine within each human person which lies at the heart of Emerson's method of self-reliance, in the form of the doctrine of the universal applicability and validity of the intuitions of the innermost soul, entered into his social philosophy, or moral theory of politics, by way of the Emersonian idea that each person knows about other persons by what he (she) knows about himself (herself). The person who is, in Emerson's sense, self-reliant is the one who will be the good fellow-citizen. "Every man's nature is a sufficient advertisement to him of the character of his fellows."²⁷ What is right for one self-reliant person is right for all, and what is wrong for one is wrong for all. What it is proper for one to do, is proper for all, and what is improper for one is improper for all. A true community is made up of self-reliant individuals who, because they have com-

²⁵ *Works*, III, p. 201.

²⁶ *Works*, III, p. 207.

²⁷ *Works*, III, p. 213.

mon goals, can often agree on the means to those ends. The State does not constitute a true community because it does not rest on the foundation of such an agreement, but involves some making rules and setting goals for others. "This undertaking for another is the blunder which stands in colossal ugliness in the governments of the world. . . . Therefore all public ends look vague and quixotic beside private ones. For any laws but those which men make for themselves are laughable."²⁸

The sharp distinction brought out in this quotation between the area of the "private" and that of the "State," and even of the "public," was one of the characteristic features of Emerson's social philosophy. An area of incalculability supervenes whenever individuality comes into play and wherever it flourishes. The predictability that is the essence of the law bends before the forcefulness of individuals. There is no predictable limit to the influence of persons because they are "organs of moral or supernatural force."

Under the dominion of an idea which possesses the minds of multitudes, as civil freedom, or the religious sentiment, the powers of persons are no longer subjects of calculation. A nation of men unanimously bent on freedom or conquest can easily confound the arithmetic of statisticians, and achieve extravagant actions, out of all proportion to their means.²⁹

To recognize this force is to have true regard for the capacities of individuals and their powers of self-transcendence.

We must also realize, however, that there is a false sort of individuality that we might call "privatism," though Emerson knew not the word. "Privatism" does not lead to self-transcendence and the negation of statistical probabilities, but rather to egotism. In some instances, "nature has secured individualism by giving the private person a high conceit of his weight in the system." There is no special type of person to whom this pestilential disease of egotism is limited.

There are dull and bright, sacred and profane, coarse and fine egotists. It is a disease that like influenza falls on all constitutions. In the distemper known to physicians as *chorea*, the patient sometimes turns round and continues to spin slowly on one spot. Is egotism a metaphysical variety of this malady? The man runs round a ring formed by his own talent, falls into an admiration of it, and loses relation to the world.³⁰

²⁸ *Works*, III, pp. 214–215.

²⁹ *Works*, III, pp. 205–206.

³⁰ *Works*, VI, pp. 132–133.

It is difficult, indeed, for a person to discover “that there are limits to the interest which his private history has for mankind.”³¹ Once one has made that discovery, however, one is so much more the human being for having learned the full reach of individuality into universality.

The antidote for this egotistic, false individualism is not, in Emerson's view, politics; it is culture, education. Politics we call on when things have gone wrong. Education is the device by which we can avoid following wrong paths.

Let us make our education brave and preventive. Politics is an after-work, a poor patching. We are always a little late. The evil is done, the law is passed, and we begin the uphill agitation for repeal of that of which we ought to have prevented the enacting. We shall one day learn to supersede politics by education. What we call our root-and-branch reforms, of slavery, war, gambling, intemperance, is only medicating the symptoms. We must begin higher up, namely in Education.³²

“All mean egotism vanishes”³³ when one becomes, by one's education, a partaker of the ages, a true aristocrat.

To be beyond egotism leads one to be social, but not always sociable, nor does a deep concern for people invariably make one popular. Truth-speaking is essential, and to speak the truth may very well bring down upon the speaker the enmity and the contempt of the people. “Popularity is for dolls. . . . There is none of the social goods that may not be purchased too dear, and mere amiableness must not take rank with high aim and self-subsistency.”³⁴ All power is a sharing of the nature of the world, a being “made of the same stuff of which events are made.” Self-reliance is the cultivation of the power that is in each of us to make oneself in the image of events, to run our course “parallel with the laws of nature.”³⁵ To become self-reliant is to become social, not in the shallow sense of being sociable or being in society, but in the far deeper sense of oneself being society. The force of individuality is that each individual must persist in being oneself. But what this means, what one is in being oneself, depends on what one makes of oneself. The

³¹ *Works*, VI, p. 135.

³² *Works*, VI, pp. 140–141.

³³ Emerson, *Nature*, p. 4; or *Works*, I, p. 10.

³⁴ *Works*, VI, pp. 162–163.

³⁵ *Works*, VI, p. 56.

transcendental individual makes himself (herself) a medium for the expression of the universal.

Thus it is that Emersonian individualism can appear, even in our day, as an admirable, and a defensible social philosophy. Emersonian individualism is not self-centeredness, despite the apparent turning inward of the principle of self-reliance. It is a way to find within ourselves that which is universal for the sake of the betterment of the social order. Thus I can defend the view that transcendental individualism is the Emersonian road to social altruism.³⁶

Columbia University.

³⁶ Presented as a paper before the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, March 4, 1977.