

Emersonian Individualism

Mises Daily: Friday, December 16, 2011 by Allen Mendenhall

Ralph Waldo Emerson is politically elusive. He's so elusive that thinkers from various schools and with various agendas have appropriated his ideas to validate some activity or another. Harold Bloom once wrote, "In the United States, we continue to have Emersonians of the Left (the post-Pragmatist Richard Rorty) and of the Right (a swarm of libertarian Republicans, who exalt President Bush the Second)."^[1] We'll have to excuse Bloom's ignorance of political movements and signifiers – libertarians who exalt President Bush, really? – and focus instead on Bloom's point that Emerson's influence is evident in a wide array of contemporary thinkers and causes.

Bloom is right that what "matters most about Emerson is that he is the theologian of the American religion of Self-Reliance."^[2] Indeed, the essay "Self-Reliance" remains the most cited of Emerson's works, and American politicians and intellectuals selectively recycle ideas of self-reliance in the service of often disparate goals.

Emerson doesn't use the term "individualism" in "Self-Reliance," which was published in 1841, when the term "individualism" was just beginning to gain traction. Tocqueville unintentionally popularized the signifier "individualism" with the publication of *Democracy in America*. He used a French term that had no counterpart in English. Translators of Tocqueville labored over this French term because its signification wasn't part of the English lexicon. Emerson's first mention of "individualism" was not until 1843.

It is clear, though, that Emerson's notion of self-reliance was tied to what later would be called "individualism." Emerson's individualism was so radical that it bordered on self-deification. Only through personal will could one realize the majesty of God. Nature for Emerson was like the handwriting of God, and individuals with a poetical sense – those who had the desire and capability to "read" nature – could understand nature's universal, divine teachings.

Lakes, streams, meadows, forests – these and other phenomena were, according to Emerson, sources of mental and spiritual pleasure or unity. They were what allowed one to become "part and parcel with God," if only one had or could become a "transparent eyeball." "Nothing at last is sacred," Emerson said, "but the integrity of your own mind." That's because a person's intellect translates shapes and forms into spiritual insights.

We cannot judge Emerson exclusively on the basis of his actions. Emerson didn't always seem self-reliant or individualistic. His politics, to the extent that they are knowable, could not be called libertarian. We're better off judging Emerson on the basis of his words, which *could* be called libertarian, even if they endow individualism with a religiosity that would make some people uncomfortable.

Emerson suggests in "Self-Reliance" that the spontaneous expression of thought or feeling is more in keeping with personal will, and hence with the natural world as constituted by human faculties, than that which is passively assumed or accepted as right or good, or that which conforms to social norms. Emerson's individualism or self-reliance exalted human intuition, which precedes reflection, and it privileged the will over the intellect. Feeling and sensation are antecedent to reason, and Emerson believed that they registered moral truths more important than anything cognition could summon forth.

Emerson's transcendentalism was, as George Santayana pointed out in 1911, a method conducive to the 19-century American mindset.^[3] As a relatively new nation seeking to define itself, America was split between two mentalities, or two sources of what Santayana called the "genteel tradition": Calvinism and transcendentalism.

The American philosophical tradition somehow managed to reconcile these seeming dualities. On the one hand, Calvinism taught that the self was bad, that man was depraved by nature and saved only by the grace of God. On the other hand, transcendentalism taught that the self was good, that man was equipped with creative faculties that could divine the presence of God in the world. The Calvinist distrusted impulses and urges as sprung from an inner evil. The transcendentalist trusted impulses and urges as moral intuition preceding society's baseless judgments and prevailing conventions.

What these two philosophies had in common was an abiding awareness of sensation and perception: a belief that the human mind registers external data in meaningful and potentially spiritual ways. The Calvinist notion of limited disclosure – that God reveals his glory through the natural world – played into the transcendentalists' conviction that the natural world supplied instruments for piecing together divinity.

The problem for Santayana is that transcendentalism was just a method, a way of tapping into one's poetical sense. What one did after that was unclear. Santayana thought that

transcendentalism was the right method, but he felt that Emerson didn't use that method to instruct us in practical living. Transcendentalism was a means to an end, but not an end itself.

According to Santayana, Emerson "had no system" because he merely "opened his eyes on the world every morning with a fresh sincerity, marking how things seemed to him then, or what they suggested to his spontaneous fancy."^[4] Emerson did not seek to group all senses and impressions into a synthetic whole. Nor did he suggest a politics toward which senses and impressions ought to lead. Santayana stops short of accusing Emerson of advancing an "anything-goes" metaphysics. But Santayana does suggest that Emerson failed to advance a set of principles; instead, Emerson gave us a technique for arriving at a set of principles. Emerson provided transportation, but gave no direction. This shortcoming – if it is a shortcoming – might explain why Bloom speaks of the "paradox of Emerson's influence," namely, that "Peace Marchers and Bushians alike are Emerson's heirs in his dialectics of power."^[5]

For Emerson, human will is paramount. It moves the intellect to create. It is immediate, not mediate. In other words, it is the sense or subjectivity that is not yet processed by the human mind. We ought to trust the integrity of will and intuition and avoid the dictates and decorum of society.

"Society," Emerson says, "everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members." Society corrupts the purity of the will by forcing individuals to second-guess their impulses and to look to others for moral guidance. Against this socialization, Emerson declares, "Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist."

Emerson's nonconformist ethic opposed habits of thinking, which society influenced but did not determine. Emerson famously stated that a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. What he meant, I think, is that humans ought to improve themselves by tapping into intuitive truths. Nature, with her figures, forms, and outlines, provides images that the individual can harness to create beauty and energize the self. Beauty therefore does not exist in the world; rather, the human mind *makes* beauty out of the externalities it has internalized. Beauty, accordingly, resides within us, but only after we *create* it.

Here we see something similar to Ayn Rand's Objectivism stripped of its appeals to divinity. Rand believed that reality existed apart from the thinking subject, that the thinking subject employs reason and logic to make sense of experience and perception, and that the self or will is instrumental in generating meaning from the phenomenal world.

Like Emerson, who did not want to deny the self by sacrificing it to social criteria for moral rightness or propriety, Rand believed that the self was the basis of ethics. The moral purpose of the individual, for her, entailed the rational pursuit of self-interest and happiness. This pursuit is possible only in certain systems of human organization, and the one Rand deemed most suitable for human flourishing was capitalism (which arguably is not a system but a result of spontaneous orders or a framework enabling spontaneous orders). In capitalism, art prospers because human creativity prospers; capitalism enables beauty, images, and shapes that help us to refine our metaphysics and to represent "the real."

Even Ludwig von Mises seems to have been influenced, if not directly by Emerson, then by those who were influenced by Emerson. Mises criticizes the "doctrines of universalism, conceptual realism, holism, collectivism, and some representatives of Gestaltpsychologie" for maintaining that "society is an entity living its own life, independent of and separate from the lives of the various individuals."^[6] When Mises criticizes universalism and collectivism as "systems of theocratic government,"^[7] he turns to William James, himself an Emersonian and one who influenced Henry Hazlitt.^[8] James supplies Mises with an argument for distinguishing religion from theocracy, and Mises seems to support James's notion of religion as, in Mises's words, "a purely personal and individual relation between man and a holy, mysterious, and awe-inspiring divine Reality."^[9] Although Mises never cites Emerson in *Human Action*, Mises does trope Emerson by discussing the "Creative Genius," the man "whose deeds and ideas cut out new paths for mankind."^[10]

Art and beauty have the potential to stimulate sensation and emotion; they have the potential to substantiate the extraordinary powers of human intellect. Just as Rand believed in the heroism of the individual, so Emerson believed that a self-reliant mind with a poetical sense could not only trust his impressions about the external world, but also act upon that trust. That does not mean that the individual is necessarily unbounded, only that the individual establishes his own boundaries and sets his own priorities.

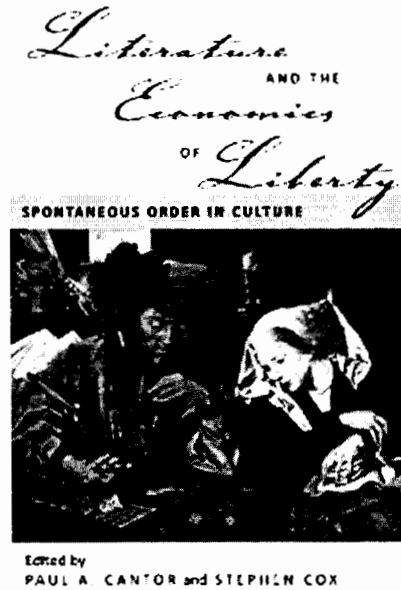
Emerson and Rand celebrate the ability of the human mind to create beauty, to generate meaning, to produce tangibles from intangibles, and to construct realities based on which and because of which we are prepared to act. This function of the imagination – is it too much to call it *genius*? – is not realized by everyone. Some go through life without self-examination and without questioning their surroundings or envisioning new surroundings, new possibilities, and new ways of thinking. These individuals lack or repress imagination and creativity. Even writers like Walt Whitman never demonstrate the powers of selfhood, the sheer strength of human will.

Whitman obstructed the will to make himself receptive to everything and everyone. He buried the will beneath a mountain of abstractions and random experiences. Santayana explains that in Whitman "democracy is carried into psychology and morals" insofar as the "various sights, moods, and emotions are given each one vote; they are declared to be all free and equal, and the innumerable commonplace moments of life are suffered to speak like the others."^[11] The slave driver is as much a part of Whitman as the slave.

Whitman never distinguishes between good and bad, right and wrong, practical and impractical, reality and fancy. He never discriminates. He becomes, in Santayana's words, an "unintellectual," "lazy," and "self-indulgent" pantheist because he merely internalizes all things, accords them equal weight, refuses to challenge their validity or viability and so expresses poetry that is presentist and value-free, so much so that it degenerates into gushes of arbitrary feeling.^[12]

Emersonian individualism is not arbitrary in this sense. It is purposeful. It differentiates and distinguishes between people and groups, good and evil, referents that are conducive to poetry and referents that are not. Whitman delighted in popularity. Emerson delighted in standing apart from others. "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion," Emerson once said, adding, "it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude."

If we take Emerson at his word, he does not seem to care whether he is misunderstood. Indeed, he submits that Pythagoras, Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton were misunderstood. "Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood?" Emerson asked, and then answered, "to be great is to be misunderstood."



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Emerson is still misunderstood, but his influence on American thought is unmistakable. He refused to tacitly accept inherited and imported orthodoxies, although he was bent on validating traditional notions of truth using new methods. Those who have inveighed against Emerson too often misconstrue or misrepresent his nuanced philosophy.

Emerson is not easy to understand. His texts demand many rereadings. His essays experimented with new techniques for clarifying old ideas, to which he gave exhilarating expression in the vocabularies of individualism and self-reliance. Perhaps the most telling legacy of this winsome philosopher is that so many people claim that "Emerson was one of us." The term "us" suggests that there's still more to learn from Emerson, that the ethic of self-reliance continues to struggle against presumptions and habits of thinking. To say that Emerson is "one of us" is to miss the points Emerson made. One ought to read Emerson not because one is told to do so, but because one wills oneself to do so.

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Notes

[1] Harold Bloom. *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (Riverhead Books, 2004), p. 190.

[2] Bloom at 190.

[3] See George Santayana, "The Genteel Tradition," in *The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy and Character and Opinion in the United States*," edited by James Seaton (Yale University Press, 2009), p. 9.

[4] Santayana at 9.

[5] Bloom at 198.

[6] Ludwig Von Mises. *Human Action*. The Scholar's Edition. Auburn, AL: Ludwig Vone Mises Institute, 1998) at 145.

[7] Mises at 150-51.

[8] See Allen Mendenhall. "Henry Hazlitt, Literary Critic." *Mises Daily*. June 6, 2011.

[9] Mises at 156.

[10] Mises at 138.

[11] Santayana at 12.

[12] Santayana at 12-13.