



## Emerson's Argument for Self-reliance as a Significant Factor in a Flourishing Life

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[Essay]

## Emerson's Argument for Self-reliance as a Significant Factor in a Flourishing Life

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### Abstract

This essay explores Emerson's reflections on self-reliance with particular reference to Emerson's understanding of the concept of self-reliance, his view of 'conformity' as the major obstacle to self-reliance, and the moral significance of his thought. The essay is based on the premise that Emerson's philosophy of self-reliance, self-reference and self-responsibility has a relevance and an application to our contemporary lives which are often conducted through subtle shades of compliance and acquiescence to popular opinion and prevailing fashions of thought and behaviour.

Ralph Waldo Emerson is remembered as a fine essayist, poet and philosopher of the nineteenth century, but he was a radical and original thinker who, perhaps, defies conventional classification and description. His writings explore a vast array of topics including education, culture, politics, freedom, love, poetry, society, solitude and personal integrity and happiness. However, underlying all the writings of Emerson is his positive commitment to individual autonomy, in thought and in action, and despite ample evidence of evil, cowardice and deception in the world which he experienced, he maintained a firm belief in the intrinsic goodness of his fellow-men and women. He accepted that many of his convictions and ideas could not perhaps be proved scientifically, perhaps could not be adequately expressed in words, and perhaps could easily be refuted by critical materialism and pragmatic realism. Consequently, reaction to Emerson's work continues to fluctuate between various assertions of its radical and inspirational qualities and critical charges relating to what is deemed Emerson's easy embrace of contradiction and dualism and his failure to deal with the problem of evil in the human world. Emerson's philosophy is one of optimism and hope, it is based as much on intuition as it is on logic or reason, and it is idealistic in its validation of the inherent worth of each individual form of existence. Emerson's commitment to individualism, to personal freedom and

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responsibility, extends to all living beings, and is therefore, the basis for a moral and ethical philosophy of universal respect and value. He is an advocate of freedom for all. (Emerson supported movements for the abolition of slavery and the enfranchisement of women, at a time when such movements were not particularly popular).

What does Emerson mean by ‘self-reliance’? The contemporary usage of the term suggests a philosophy of independent action, a reliance on one’s own resources as opposed to dependence on others. There are many self-help manuals exhorting readers to extricate themselves from dependent and co-dependent relationships and warning against the restrictions and constrictions inherent in such a way of living. Self-help books, psychologists, parents and teachers commonly exhort the adult or child to ‘trust oneself’, to ‘think for oneself’ and to be independent of peer-pressure in its many guises. This exhortation, however, is often delivered in an authoritarian voice which contradicts its message by implication that the ‘expert’ knows what one needs and how one should live. As Emerson noted, and as we have all experienced, ‘you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it’ (Emerson, 2000: 136). Contemporary society pays lip-service to individual autonomy and self-direction while simultaneously imposing restrictions and limitations on personal freedom and creativity. For Emerson, however, the concept of self-reliance refers more significantly to the commitment to intelligent and imaginative independence and freedom whereby one has the courage and enthusiasm to think and to express one’s own thoughts, ideas and dreams rather than a fearful or careful reiteration of popular opinion or traditional ‘truth’. It emerges from a belief that one is capable of self-guidance and self-determination. Emerson’s message is to ‘trust thyself’, to dare to see the world with your own eyes, to experience life from your own heart and to trust your own instincts and intuitions. This is the attitude towards life which may be observed in infants and small children, before they have been ‘clapped into jail by [their] consciousness’ (Emerson, 2000: 134). A contemporary of Emerson, the romantic poet, William Wordsworth, also associates childhood with unfettered imagination, primary feeling, and the possibility of union with the expansive world of nature: ‘[As] a child, I held unconscious intercourse / With the eternal Beauty, drinking in / A pure organic pleasure’ (Wordsworth, 1984: 390). With the loss of the intensity of instinctual drives and the oceanic feeling of being at one with the universe, Wordsworth discerns in the transition to

adulthood a substitution of learned behaviours, adherence to social norms, and preoccupation with material affairs as he echoes Emerson's description of being 'clapped into jail': 'Shades of the prison-house begin to close / Upon the growing boy' (Wordsworth, 1984: 390). Emerson describes the child's attitude as an 'unaffected, unbiased, unbribeable, unafrighted innocence', and he urges us, as adults, to attempt a re-adoption of this creative engagement with the world. This involves listening openly to 'the voices which we hear in solitude' (Emerson, 2000: 134), and expressing them publicly without the usual filters through which they fade and lose their originality.

Emerson explains that the filters which distort our original engagements with and interpretations of the world, and which mitigate against the development and the practice of self-reliance, result from our attachment to the rules of conformity and consistency. 'The virtue in most request is conformity' (Emerson, 2000: 134), and society expects our agreement and surrender to its customs and institutions; hence, our inclination to look to the past, to tradition, to what has been done and said before, and, particularly, to those whom history and popular opinion have ascribed authority and greatness: 'I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions' (Emerson, 2000: 135). The potential creativity and originality of students everywhere is often dampened and even crushed by the expectation and the demand to learn from past 'masters', to reproduce the ideas of the past and to temper one's own interpretation of the world with accepted dogma and opinion. (I recall a young, talented student who had enjoyed a passionate engagement with English literature while at secondary school and who, therefore, went on to study this subject at college level. Here, she found that the ordained emphasis on secondary comment, theory and criticism meant that she no longer experienced the depth of a fresh and personal encounter with the primary literature. Consequently, she changed courses; I believe that her experience is not an isolated one). The result is, according to Emerson, that 'Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not say 'I think,' 'I am,' but quotes some saint or sage' (Emerson, 2000: 142). Therefore, 'We are like children who repeat by rote the sentences of granddames and tutors' (Emerson, 2000: 143). How many of our opinions and reactions are borrowed or adapted from the accepted opinion of the day? Can we recognize a grain of truth in Nietzsche's comment on the matter? 'The first opinion that occurs to us when we are suddenly asked about a matter is usually not our own, but only the customary

one, appropriate to our caste, position, or parentage; our own opinions seldom swim near the surface' (Nietzsche, 1984: 245). In an effort to please, to be accepted and to be included, we conform to the perceived dictates of our society, our acquaintances, our institutions and our families.

Emerson warns against the futility of this approach; he argues that 'truth is handsomer than the affectation of love' (Emerson, 2000: 135), and claims that, deep down, spontaneous and honest expression in human relations is what we deeply crave and respect: 'Nothing shall warp me from the belief that every man is a lover of truth' (Emerson, 2000: 415). Therefore, when I speak my own truth, without thought of feigning flattery or easy compliance, I take the risk of relating and communicating in a real way: 'Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist' (Emerson, 2000: 134). The rewards, in terms of self-reliance, relationship and friendship outweigh the risks: 'Men in all ways are better than they seem. They like flattery for the moment, but they know the truth for their own. It is a foolish cowardice which keeps us from trusting them and speaking to them rude truth' (Emerson, 2000: 413). Emerson also points to the truth of the body which often contradicts the intention of the spoken word: 'There is confession in the glances of our eyes, in our smiles, in salutations, and the grasp of hands' (Emerson, 2000: 185). We may flatter, comply and converse through well-chosen words, but the insincerity of our verbal expression may be detected in our physical demeanour: 'Truth tyrannizes over the unwilling members of the body. Faces never lie, it is said. No man need be deceived who will study the changes of expression. When a man speaks the truth in the spirit of truth, his eye is as clear as the heavens. When he has base ends and speaks falsely, the eye is muddy and sometimes asquint' (Emerson, 2000: 184). Therefore, sincerity and honesty of expression is always preferable to the empty echoes of conformity and compliance.

Conformity to the ideas of others is often coupled with a fear of personal inconsistency in the expression of our views. We insist on holding on to our old convictions and opinions because we perceive them to be markers of our identity, especially in the eyes of others. We do not like to be seen to change our minds, to have been in error, to have been mistaken. However, Emerson warns that '[a] foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds' (Emerson, 2000: 138), the minds who claim an unchanging allegiance to a set image with assertions of permanency: 'This is what I always do/say/feel, and I'm not going to change'. But life is change and growth, and we can always learn something new.

Emerson reminds us that '[m]an's life is a progress, and not a station' (Emerson, 2000: 169), that new experiences open before us and that we are, therefore, always learning. Everyone, even the wisest and most learned, can learn something new, can glimpse a different perspective and can integrate the unfamiliar with the well-worn and well-tried. So what if we contradict ourselves? So what if we change our minds and courageously express our altered perception? This is part of growth, of life, as we 'live ever in a new day' (Emerson, 2000: 138). Emerson's advice is to '[s]peak what you think now in hard words and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said today' (Emerson, 2000: 138). He urges us to look to ourselves for our own truth, and to disregard our fears of being judged or misunderstood. The only judgement that really matters is our own: 'Very idle is all curiosity concerning other people's estimate of us' (Emerson, 2000: 185), and our attempts at sincerity and honesty will have their own success: 'Never was a sincere word utterly lost' (Emerson, 2000: 185).

Emerson urges us to be spontaneous in the expression of our thoughts and he argues that such spontaneity is at the root of originality, creativity and, indeed, genius: 'To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men – that is genius' (Emerson, 2000: 132). So often, a passing thought or idea is privately dismissed as 'impossible', 'crazy' or 'ridiculous', and the flash of insight which it contains is extinguished. Sometimes, however, this same idea emerges from someone else, an artist, an inventor, a poet or a philosopher, and, regretfully, we realize that our original idea was of value, had we had the courage to own it: 'In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty' (Emerson, 2000: 132). Emerson tries to persuade us that we can all be geniuses, poets, inventors, if we but listen to our hearts: 'There is a certain wisdom of humanity which is common to the greatest men with the lowest, which our ordinary education often labours to silence and obstruct' (Emerson, 2000: 241). Emerson's critique of 'ordinary education' is echoed by Wordsworth, in his call for a wisdom of the heart: 'Our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things; / We murder to dissect. / Enough of science and of art; / Close up these barren leaves; / Come forth, and bring with you a heart / That watches and receives' (Wordsworth, 1984: 131). Wisdom and truth are not the prerogative of the learned and the scholarly; each individual has access to his/her own truth, and this truth has a validity which may be honoured

if we share it with the world: ‘The learned and the studious of thought have no monopoly of wisdom... We owe many valuable observations to people who are not very acute or profound, and who say the thing without effort which we want and have long been hunting in vain’ (Emerson, 2000: 242). Similarly, one of the pleasures of great literature is the discovery of our own private and secrets thoughts articulated by another; there is joy in the recognition that we are not alone in our thoughts, experiences and interpretations, and we are often filled with admiration for those who dare to utter what we have thought and felt: ‘The great poet makes us feel our own wealth’ (Emerson, 2000: 246).

Frequently, honesty, realness and spontaneity in the utterance of one individual free the other to risk doing likewise. This, according to Emerson, is essential to genuine friendship: ‘A friend is a person with whom I may be sincere. Before him I may think aloud’ (Emerson, 2000: 207). Nietzsche, a philosopher who admired much of Emerson’s work, echoes this sentiment: ‘What I have always needed most to cure and restore myself, however, was the belief that I was not the only one to be thus, to see thus – I needed the enchanting intuition of kinship and equality in the eye and in desire, repose in a trusted friendship; I needed a shared blindness, with no suspicion or question marks’ (Nietzsche, 1984: 4). However, Emerson warns us that friendship is not an answer to our own deficiencies and limitations; it demands self-reliance on our part: ‘We must be our own before we can be another’s’ (Emerson, 2000: 211). This interpretation of friendship rejects the image of fusion, in ideas and in character. A certain distance remains even between the best of friends: ‘Two human beings are like globes, which can touch only in a point’ (Emerson, 2000: 323). Emerson asserts the essential solitude of the human being while celebrating the joy of friendship: ‘We walk alone in the world’ (Emerson, 2000: 212). An acceptance of this paradox, between solitude and connection, between our essential aloneness and our relational nature, enables a richer relationship or friendship to emerge. This is the argument of the German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke. In asserting emphatically that ‘one is alone’, Rilke argues ‘that even between the *closest* human beings infinite distances continue to exist, [but] a wonderful living side by side can grow up, if they succeed in loving the distance between them which makes it possible for each to see the other whole and against a wide sky’ (Rilke, 2004: 34). Genuine friendship is not concerned with echoing the friend’s opinions or observations. Rather, it celebrates both the similarities and the differences between friends, and it honours the individuality

and uniqueness of both parties: 'Friendship requires that rare mean betwixt likeness and unlikeness' and it insists each maintain autonomy and separateness: 'Let him not cease for an instant to be himself' (Emerson, 2000: 210). Genuine friendship is built on the foundation of mutual integrity, independence and respect, and it survives the inevitable vicissitudes and challenges which are encountered throughout a life: 'The end of friendship...is for aid and comfort through all the relations and passages of life and death. It is fit for serene days and graceful gifts and country rambles, but also for rough roads and hard fare, shipwreck, poverty and persecution' (Emerson, 2000: 209). Thus, friendship is not for the faint-hearted, the slaves of conformity or of consistency. It involves an active, honest and open engagement with self and other, a self-reliance in each, and a willingness to embrace agreement and disagreement, likeness and difference, sympathy and criticism; in the simplest terms, Emerson explains that 'the only way to have a friend is to be one' (Emerson, 2000: 211).

Emerson's commitment to the primacy of the individual is closely allied to his understanding of the essential uniqueness of each living being. He urges a celebration of this uniqueness, arguing that it is a testimony to the absolute necessity of every person. Each individual has a purpose and a talent which is not available to anyone else: 'Each man has his own vocation. The talent is the call' (Emerson, 2000: 177). Emerson looks to nature for an acknowledgement of this perspective: 'These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are' (Emerson, 2000: 143). The multiplicity of the stars does not diminish the brilliance and beauty of a single one. Similarly with the human race: 'Nature never rhymes her children, nor makes two men alike' (Emerson, 2000: 336). Therefore, it matters not how many geniuses, heroes or champions have preceded us in our chosen path; our contribution will be its own, and will be worthwhile for that reason: 'If John was perfect, why are you and I alive? As long as man exists, there is some need of him' (Emerson, 2000: 397). The 'need' of every person is unique to that individual, and can only be expressed in a spirit of self-reliance and self-determination: 'Insist on yourself; never imitate' (Emerson, 2000: 150). This is Emerson's blue-print for a good life: 'When good is near you, when you have life in yourself, it is not by any known or accustomed way; you shall not discern the footprints of any other' (Emerson, 2000: 143). Self-reliance means forging one's own path, thinking one's own thoughts and meeting life with courage and enthusiasm. It means a heart-felt engagement with the present



moment, unencumbered by the restraints of dead traditions or the paralysis of perfection. 'To finish the moment, to find the journey's end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom' (Emerson, 2000: 314).

Emerson's doctrine of self-reliance is a call to our better natures; it is an invitation to embrace our own thoughts and opinions, our own convictions and contradictions and our own integrity and independence. For Emerson, this is what really matters because '[n]othing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind' (Emerson, 2000: 135). Self-trust may be risky and difficult, it may demand a retreat from the crowd and from the safety of consensus, but it is the only way towards peace, creativity and fulfilment: 'Nothing can bring you peace but yourself' (Emerson, 2000: 153). Emerson's belief in the liberating and enriching power of independent thinking and living is echoed in the famous words of his friend and colleague, Henry David Thoreau, who personally represented the self-reliance promoted by Emerson through his own life decisions and commitments. Thoreau, like Emerson, urges us to follow our own star, no matter how eccentric or unfamiliar it may appear to be: '[I]f one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours' (Thoreau, 2004: 303). This is also Emerson's message; to live our own lives, to think our own thoughts and to follow our own dreams. It is an idealistic and optimistic message, and it is open to charges of over-simplicity and childish enthusiasm. So what? Is it any less valid than the proliferation of cynical 'realism' and media-feeding fantasy which so often passes for intelligent analysis of the human condition in our modern, sophisticated world? I prefer to cheer with Emerson! 'Onward and onward! In liberated moments we know that a new picture of life and duty is already possible' (Emerson, 2000: 321).

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