

Metaphysical Emerson

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Joseph Urbas, *Emerson's Metaphysics: A Song of Laws and Causes* (Lexington Books, 2016), 234 pp., \$95.00 cloth.

The “Emerson revival” of the last decades has produced extraordinary work offering us an Emerson whose sensitivity to moods, responsiveness to the temptation toward skepticism, alertness to the dynamics of language, and anticipations of literary and philosophical pragmatism make him a vitally relevant presence. At the same time, some of this work has minimized aspects of Emerson’s thought that, to modern readers, can seem vestiges of a bygone philosophical and cultural era – e.g., his invocations of God and the Over-soul, his appeals to the moral sentiment, his apparent faith in progress, and the like.

In *Emerson's Metaphysics*, Joseph Urbas enters a powerful challenge to such “revivalist” approaches to Emerson. He contests readings that he sees as recasting Emerson “in our own free-floating, nomadic, secular, postmodern, post-metaphysical likeness” (206) and argues that, rather than a postmodern pragmatist *avant la lettre*, Emerson was most essentially a metaphysician and that a metaphysical idea of “cause” – understood as a continuously acting, purposive but impersonal, first-cause (God) that is at once the ontological ground of all being and the source of both natural law and of ethical laws revealed through the moral sentiment – was the master-thought shaping and unifying Emerson’s thinking from his undergraduate days at Harvard to the end of his life.

In making this argument, Urbas adopts an interpretive strategy that has a crucial bearing on the structure and, ultimately, the power of his argument.

Maintaining that the “underlying conceptual continuities” in Emerson’s thought “cut across the boundaries of the individual essays and range freely throughout his writings,” Urbas does not develop his claims through sustained readings of individual texts (or groups of texts). Rather, he argues, in order to ensure that “Emerson’s lifelong metaphysical commitments” are not “suddenly undone by the subversive power of single essays or even single sentences or phrases,” “we need to step back and read the Emerson corpus comprehensively and cross-sectionally” (xxix, xxx). Comprehensively – meaning that Urbas accords equal status to all of Emerson’s writing whether published or unpublished and whether in essays, lectures and addresses, journals, letters, notebooks, sermons, or poetry. Cross-sectionally – meaning Urbas sees no significant changes in Emerson’s thought after the late 1820s or early 1830s and so frequently combines within a single paragraph – or sentence – quotations spanning decades and cutting across the various periods into which Emerson’s work has often been divided.

At least partly due to this interpretive strategy, the structure of the book is somewhat loose and the chapters stand as semi-autonomous considerations of the metaphysical concept of cause from the perspective of literary/cultural history, intellectual biography, and philosophical explication. It’s helpful, though, to see the work structured in three main sections.

Chapters one and two represent the book’s argumentative foundation. Chapter One sketches an intellectual history of New England thought from 1820 to 1850 as the background within which Emerson’s philosophy emerged. Deploying an extensive body of contemporaneous sources, Urbas argues that American Transcendentalism must be seen “as part of a broad transatlantic rehabilitation of metaphysics initiated by the German idealists” (23). Urbas argues that, influenced by Victor Cousin among others, New England thinkers responded to the perceived subjectivism of Kantian philosophy by embracing a neo-Platonic metaphysics of the Absolute in which epistemological concerns are subsumed within a broader focus on metaphysics and ontology. Hence, what “truly distinguishes the Transcendentalist movement *philosophically*” is its ontology not its epistemology (23). Chapter Two is biographical and argues that Emerson’s

undergraduate struggles with the "Scotch Goliath, David Hume" and the influence of his Aunt Mary Moody Emerson decisively shaped his thought. For Emerson, Urbas argues, Hume's skeptical assault on cause (necessary connection) ramified to mean "no self, no world, no God; no way of 'prov[ing] the existence of the Universe, and of its Founder'" (38). Given the stakes of this skeptical threat, Urbas contends that Emerson sought a definitive response which he found in embracing a realist causal monism—an embrace that Urbas sees as grounded not in reasoned argument but in "faith in the moral sentiment" and the conviction it provides that "self and world form a causal continuum, that the very same thought moving within us is also 'parent of the universe'" (35, 20).

Chapters three through five bolster Urbas's argument that the idea of cause was central in Emerson's milieu and flesh out his account of cause through considering the views and influence of several of his contemporaries. Chapter Three offers very helpful accounts of some of the views of Sampson Reed, Coleridge, Joseph-Marie Degérando, and Victor Cousin, and Chapter Five traces how, under the influence of Mary Moody Emerson, William Ellery Channing, Margaret Fuller, and Bronson Alcott, Emerson moved from "skeptical doubt to a revitalized doctrine of faith based on the core principle of causation" (123). Rather than considering the influence of individual thinkers, Chapter Four focuses on theological debates within New England Christianity concerning God as cause, and is especially illuminating in tracing how two of Emerson's most celebrated and controversial theological stances – his critique of 'historical Christianity' and his insistence upon the impersonality of the deity – are both informed by his understanding of God as cause and contribute to shaping that idea.

The final section of the book, consisting of Chapter 6 and the Conclusion, is, in at least one sense, its philosophical payoff. Here Urbas explicates several concepts that are central within Emerson's writing and argues that cause and effect are the "only conceptually adequate terms" through which to understand them and the "continuity underlying" the developments, shifts, reversals, and apparent contradictions within his thought (155). Among the ideas Urbas addresses, I single out three for

comment. First, Urbas follows most Emerson scholars in emphasizing that self-reliance, rather than celebrating the power of the individual ego, calls for abandoning oneself to an impersonal power (God, the One, Over-Soul).

However, his identification of God as most essentially a *causal* power or the “source of all causal power” gives his account a distinctive cast (159). He argues that Emerson sees “selfhood as continuous with the causal powers of nature” (159), that genius stems from obedience to impersonal causal laws, and that “Emersonian moral autonomy requires strict obedience to the causal ground of all being” (191). Second, Urbas argues that as a “metaphysical realist historian” Emerson held that the same causal ground of being underlying self-reliance underlies historical change. As Urbas develops it, this conviction forms the basis for a kind of progressive, impersonal, ‘great man’ view of historical change. He suggests that, for Emerson, “the actions of great moral, intellectual, religious, and political reformers” are driven by this underlying causal ground and, as such, they are “less persons in the narrow sense than ‘causal facts which carry forward races to new convictions, and elevate the rule of life’” (176). Against those who would challenge – among other things – the progressivism of this view of history or rebuke Emerson for uncritical optimism, Urbas maintains that “Emerson is optimistic *because reality itself is*” and that his “‘affirmative philosophy’ is not naïveté, nor [...] a purely mental attitude; again, it is underwritten by the structure of the world, by the ‘optimism of nature’” (204, 206). The third idea I will mention represents what Urbas calls the “Emersonian synthesis” (201). Informed by Emerson’s portrait of Plato as the “balanced soul” who gave due weight to both the One and the many, Urbas argues that there is no opposition between acknowledging Emerson’s commitment to a foundational metaphysics based in a continuously acting first cause and celebrating the “revivalist” Emerson who celebrates flux, fluidity, shifting perspectives, and the world-altering effects of mood. Urbas argues that Emerson’s “firm metaphysical commitment” *enables* his flexibility of thought and suggests that Emerson’s “ultimate reliance on a solid foundation [...] encourage[d] intellectual daring and mobility” (193, 205). Urbas presents this Emersonian synthesis primarily as a matter of Emerson’s psychology – the “Doctrine of Faith,” he says, “freed

him up," "unleashed subversive sallies," and gave "him the courage to dip his pen 'in the blackest ink' and to give 'full swing to his skepticism'" (205, 193). However, there is also a suggestion that these aspects of Emerson's thought express different aspects of the Deity or the ultimate metaphysical ground of reality: "'the necessity by which the Deity rushes into distribution, into variety and particles, is not less divine than the unity from which all begins'" (203). So regarded, what Urbas calls "subversive sallies" are not playful forays into heretical doctrines while armored with the certainty of the true faith. They are efforts to express equal parts of the truth, and a metaphysical doctrine that denied them would be as false as one that recognized nothing else.

This sketch of the contents and methods of *Emerson's Metaphysics* indicates the magnitude of its ambitions (a fundamental reordering of our understanding of Emerson and our approach to interpreting his work), the range of historical, biographical, and philosophical considerations advanced in support of its claims, and how its overarching view of Emerson's thought shapes the understanding of specific ideas and issues. Given these features of the work, it should receive wide attention among scholars of American literary/cultural history and philosophy and represents an extremely valuable resource for those seeking a better understanding of Emerson's place within the nineteenth-century New England literary/philosophical milieu. These same features, of course, mean that it invites critical engagement at many different levels and along many different fronts. Some will challenge Urbas's view of the essential stability of Emerson's thought across his lifetime, his estimation of the relative weight of metaphysics and epistemology in Emerson's thought, and, among other matters, many of the specific positions that Urbas attributes to Emerson. (Urbas's argumentative focus on establishing that Emerson held various views results in his taking no critical distance from them; and this means that he often attributes quite controversial claims to Emerson but provides no critical assessment or defense.) This openness to critical challenge is a strength of Urbas's work and one form of its fruitfulness. For, in addition to the contribution the book makes through the positive position it presents, the strength of its presentation means that challenges to it will advance our

understanding not only of Emerson but of the interpretive and philosophical issues Urbas lays before us.

Rather than developing any of possible challenges noted above, I want to open two paths for consideration that engage the main burdens of the work as a whole.

First, in light of the extensive historical, biographical, and philosophical evidence that Urbas has developed, it is undeniable that a metaphysical notion of God (understood as the continuously active, impersonal, ground of all being) played an essential role in Emerson's thought. Further, and more to the point of his specific project, Urbas has provided a wealth of evidence in support of his claim that, for Emerson, causality (through impersonal law) is the central and most important attribute of this God. This is an important contribution to our understanding of Emerson's biography and the historical/cultural context within which he worked. It remains unclear, however, how to assess the *philosophical* significance of this evidence and whether it should discomfit post-modern, neo-pragmatist, Cavellian, or other "revivalist" readings of Emerson. For no serious reader of Emerson simply ignores his invocations of a divine source of power and agency or treats them merely as dispensable markers of his time and place. However, while acknowledging the ubiquity of such ideas, serious readers of Emerson may insist that their meaning and force can only be determined by considering the specific context within which they appear. This is especially important in interpreting an author notorious for the glaring contradictions and reversals characterizing his texts. Interpreting Emerson's remarks within the contexts in which they appear is clearly essential to properly understanding what Emerson himself believed. However, it also allows us to move beyond consideration of what Emerson himself may have believed (interesting and important as that can be) to an examination of what the language of his texts themselves supports. However, Urbas does not, and cannot, devote this kind of attention to the integrity of Emerson's texts and the meaning and force of remarks within those texts; doing so is rendered impossible by his comprehensive and cross-sectional approach to Emerson's writing. For that approach extracts remarks from the texts within which they occur and treats

their force and meaning as carried by the isolated remarks themselves. Paradoxically, then, while Urbas insists upon the necessity of placing *Emerson* within his historical/cultural context, he discounts the importance of placing *his remarks* within their textual context.

A second kind of issue may be raised by those who, with Urbas, believe that Emerson's invocations of the divine as a metaphysical, causal source of being and power must be made central to any adequate interpretation of his thought. Namely, since essential elements of the modern worldview oppose at least some understandings of this idea, what kinds of argument can be provided for it (by Emerson or others) that would support taking it seriously. Surprisingly, even though Urbas has devoted a great deal of energy to arguing that Emerson held this view and to explaining the critical roles it played in his thought, he seems quite unconcerned with this issue – and, evidently, sees Emerson as equally unconcerned. About Emerson, Urbas accepts the opinion common among his detractors that he was neither interested in, nor capable of, producing arguments for his views but instead, according to Urbas, counted upon the direct testimony of intuition and the experience of the moral sense (35). But even supposing one accepts this view of Emerson, one might expect Urbas to attempt to amend this lack. Rather than doing so, however, he simply allows that Emerson's views – views that, it should be emphasized, Urbas regards as the central axes of his entire philosophy – may seem "hopelessly quaint" (193). For those who wish to find in Emerson not simply a figure of historical interest but a thinker of contemporary philosophical relevance, this should be profoundly unsatisfying. Urbas seems to suggest that our ability to regard Emerson as a serious philosophical figure rests, if not simply upon whether we have a taste for certain quaint ideas, then upon whether we happen to share his theological convictions.

Happily, a path beyond this is suggested, albeit only suggested, by Urbas himself. In discussing Emerson's causal monism, he remarks that "In Emerson's *prose* as in his vision of reality, 'relation and connection are not somewhere and sometimes, but everywhere and always'" (45, emphasis added). This remark suggests that, especially for a writer and reader, it is *in language* that the impersonal power that is the ground of our being and the

source of our capacity for thought and action will be encountered most directly and palpably. To take seriously the idea that in Emerson's texts "relation and connection are not somewhere and sometime, but everywhere and always" is, then, to recognize the texts themselves as immediately available sites for encountering that power that, as Emerson puts it, "speaks above our will." Accordingly, rather than asking us to believe in a "hopelessly quaint" doctrine in the absence of any argument or evidence, Emerson's texts offer the evidence of, and in, his writing. That is, argument for the reality and agency of the causal power that Urbas suggests is the center of Emerson's thought can be provided precisely through reading and interpreting his texts – through bringing to light their endlessly astonishing connections and coherencies. This, however, is a source of evidence and a form of argument that Urbas's suspicion of "post-modern" readings may lead him to distrust and that, in any case, his comprehensive and cross-sectional approach to reading Emerson renders, once again, unavailable.

Both of these paths for consideration turn on limitations of Urbas's approach to Emerson's texts and point to questions about what modes of reading Emerson will be most philosophically fruitful. Urbas is surely correct to emphasize an historically informed and broadly based approach, but his impatience with the work of those engaged in more narrowly internal textual analysis leads him to slight the importance of such approaches. This issue is not (merely) a dispute among differing intellectual fashions or standards of argument and evidence within the different disciplinary areas in which Emerson is engaged. Disagreements about the most fruitful modes of reading Emerson are about nothing less than the vital, and still unresolved, question of what kind of thinker and writer we take Emerson to be – about the *nature* of his texts and so the kinds of critical attention for which they call.

The fact that *Emerson's Metaphysics* invites, and provides a productive site for thinking about, this question is yet another reason that those interested in Emerson will welcome the appearance of the work and will benefit from its careful study.

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