

Self-Reliance in Emerson's Sermons and Essays: First Series

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*A*s David Robinson establishes in his landmark studies, *Apostle of Culture: Emerson as Preacher and Lecturer* (1982) and *Emerson and the Conduct of Life* (1993), Emerson's Transcendentalism of the 1830s and 1840s grew principally out of early nineteenth-century Unitarian theology, which he had engaged in depth as minister of Boston's Second Church between 1829 and 1832. Emerson developed some aspects of his philosophy sooner than others, but nearly all of the key components of his core doctrine of self-reliance, laid out in full for the first time in the *Essays: First Series* (1841), can be found in sermons he preached during his tenure at the Second Church.

Rejecting the fundamental Calvinist tenets of predestination and the innate depravity of man, New England Unitarian leaders in the first third of the nineteenth century, such as Henry Ware, William Ellery Channing, Joseph Stevens Buckminster, and Henry Ware Jr., asserted that each human being is "born morally neutral" and can attain salvation by cultivating his character – his ability to think, feel, and act virtuously on a regular basis.¹ The believer was to be guided in "self-culture" by his divinely implanted conscience or "moral sense," which allowed him to rationally intuit right and wrong and obliged him to act virtuously.² The Unitarian faithful also looked to the teachings and example of Jesus Christ – whom they viewed as a man of perfect character rather than God – for direction and inspiration.³ For when one turned inward, Channing, Ware Jr., and the others held, one would find that the virtues advocated

and practiced by Jesus were derived from the same spirit that informed one's own conscience.

As the minister of the Second Church, Emerson incorporated more Neoplatonism into his sermons than his colleagues did, presenting God as the Unity of all things, and the moral sense as an emanation of this All. But, most significantly, while Emerson stressed that the divine Lawgiver within each individual demanded Christ-like behavior, he also posited in a number of homilies that it called for self-reliance – the successful enactment in thought, word, and deed of one's particular set of innate talents in the environment in which one finds oneself. In these sermons, self-reliance is the source of virtuous conduct and the means of achieving saving character while conformity, dishonesty, and other forms of self-negation impede all growth in that direction. Furthermore, in these sermons, to make the most of one's native abilities in each area of one's existence is to become unlike anyone else. "I believe God gave to every man the germ of a peculiar character," Emerson writes in Sermon XC, first preached on 3 October 1830, "and the more finished the character the more striking is its individuality."⁴ Thus, though Emerson discusses virtues of character in his homilies on self-reliance that bear the same names – humility, charity, etc. – as those described by Unitarians, his theology implies that their meaning is potentially different for each person. Ultimately, as Emerson fully embraced the implications of this doctrine in the 1830s, Jesus came to represent for him not the moral sense incarnate, but the most self-reliant man in recorded history, who was inspiring because he had made so much of his native powers in the situation allotted him by providence.⁵

Emerson has little to say in the homilies about the heavenly reward for a life of self-reliance, but he is very specific about the earthly benefits of such an existence in Sermon LXXXI on Matthew 7:20, *By their fruits, ye shall know them*, first preached on 4 July 1830. He asserts that the words of Jesus cited in his text signify that "every mind hath its mark of character which cannot be concealed" (CS 2:216). Character, Emerson

believes, is cumulative: "every past act and every past thought is represented by the actual condition at which now we are arrived" (CS 2:217). Each self-reliant act strengthens one's character, making it easier to be virtuous in the future; each act of self-negation has the opposite effect. Only a strong character, therefore, can produce truly virtuous speech and action continually over an extended period of time, and thus one can no more hide one's character than one can hide one's words and deeds.

If for every crime that a man should commit there should instantly appear on his forehead the name of his offence, as *fraud*, or *slander*, or *homicide*, and for every virtue, it should there be writ, *humility*, *fortitude*, *charity*, *patriotism*, there would be a more gross and sudden means of publishing character, but hardly more certain, than does now exist. (CS 2:220)

A second implication of the text from Matthew, Emerson claims, is that "there are no counterfeit reputations; every man passes for what he is worth in the opinions of men" (CS 2:218). Not only is one's character plainly expressed in one's actions and speech, but it will always be seen and properly esteemed. Since humans share a "common nature" (CS 2:218), Emerson explains, they can accurately gauge where their fellow beings stand in relation to virtue and vice. "We know very well what temptations have force over us, and how they have force, and we know what considerations have had power to neutralize them" (CS 2:219). Certainly, Emerson admits, "it cannot be pretended that every individual's character is unerringly known to every individual with whom he has intercourse" (CS 2:220). The necessarily limited experience of a given witness makes it impossible for him to recognize each virtue or vice that exhibits itself in the behavior of all those he meets. Nevertheless, Emerson adds, the "impression" one makes on "all the persons with whom [one] has dealt must, taken together, be true to [one's] character" (CS 2:220). People talk, he says: "there is a continual intercourse among men, the

overestimate which is made of him by those who witness one part of his actions is corrected by the underestimate that is made of him by those who witness another part. And if his goodness or wickedness be extraordinary, the more excited is the curiosity of his fellowmen" (CS 2:218). In other words, God creates and brings people together in such a way as to ensure that "a man's reputation is true to his character" (CS 2:220).

In Sermon CXXXIV, delivered on 6 November 1831, Emerson offers a new twist to his theory that "every man passes for what he is worth in the opinions of men" when he indicates that humans deduce each other's characters not by – or not only by – drawing upon experience and comparing notes with others, but by observing or intuiting a certain harmony in their thoughts, words, and actions. The result of self-reliance, Emerson says, is "that habit of mind which we denote by the word 'singleness' or 'single mindedness.' It is 'truth in inward parts' – truth pervading the whole man. It is the character of that mind which does what it does with its own full consent; a man who does not look one way and walk another; a man in whom there is no rebellion of so much as a gesture or a word from the single purpose which all his powers conspire to fulfill" (CS 3:263). The "singleness" a strong character exhibits is the Unity of the universe – it is God – and thus, one is left to suppose, witnesses recognize it with their moral sense.⁶

Finally, in Sermon CXLIII, delivered on 5 February 1832, Emerson offers important insights about the role of one's surroundings in the process of cultivating one's character self-reliantly. He asserts that each person's "*high calling*" (CS 4:68), her ideal character, is hidden from her until she begins to act in the world. Guided by the "divine voice" (CS 4:66) within, she discovers what she can and cannot do through trial, error, reflection, and further trial, and adjusts her behavior accordingly. Emerson concludes that the "circumstances" that restrict each human being's freedom to act, teach a self-reliant individual his calling and help him to fulfill it,

much as "winds" assist a "pilot" in bringing his "ship into harbour" (CS 4:67). "In a degree," Emerson writes, "[a man] always is affected by the nation, age, family, profession, friendships, he falls upon; but he exerts his influence, as well as receives it. And that, in proportion to the strength of his character" (CS 4:67).

Emerson's discussions of self-reliance and the character it produces in *Essays: First Series* appear primarily in the chapters on "Self-Reliance," "Spiritual Laws," and "The Over-Soul." In these texts, the Transcendentalist maintains that each human being has a "calling," an ideal path to follow in life that would allow him to fully achieve his character.⁷ He holds that character is the result of self-reliant thought, action, and speech, and that character is "cumulative" (CW 2:34-35). As he does in Sermon CXLIII, Emerson contends in *Essays* that to be self-reliant, to achieve character, is to embrace one's "constitution" (CW 2:30, 82), the fated conditions of one's existence, as the means of exercising power in the world.⁸ "Trust thyself," he writes in "Self-Reliance,"

every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine Providence has found for you; the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. (CW 2:28)

Unlike the homilies, *Essays* does not posit the existence of an afterlife – though, the difference is practically negligible, as Emerson's understanding of self-reliance in the sermons is grounded entirely in his experience of the present world. A good life, like a bad life, is its own reward. Nevertheless, Emerson does affirm in *Essays* that society never fails to appreciate an individual's merit. To cite a passage from "Spiritual Laws" derived from Sermon LXXXI: "A man passes for what he is worth. What he is, engraves itself on his face, on his form, on his

fortunes, in letters of light. Concealment avails him nothing; boasting nothing” (CW 2:92). Drawing upon the argument of Sermon CXXXIV, Emerson adds in “Self-Reliance” that it is the Unity of a self-reliant individual’s thoughts, words, and deeds that allows others to distinguish his character.

In this pleasing, contrite wood-life which God allows me, let me record day by day my honest thought without prospect or retrospect, and, I cannot doubt, it will be found symmetrical.... We pass for what we are.... There will be an agreement in whatever variety of actions, so they be each honest and natural in their hour. For of one will, the actions will be harmonious.... Your genuine action will explain itself and will explain your other genuine actions. (CW 2:34)

If an individual is *not* self-reliant, Emerson claims in “Spiritual Laws,” “the eye of the beholder is puzzled, detecting many unlike tendencies, and a life not yet at one” (CW 2:93). Character is thus the amount of “singleness” – of constitutional obedience – that others perceive in a person’s words and deeds over time. And though each calling is unique, unprecedented, and unpredictable, the presence of God within all those an individual encounters guarantees that, sooner or later, her moral progress will be discerned. As Emerson remarks in “The Over-Soul”: “By the same fire, vital, consecrating, celestial, which burns until it shall dissolve all things into the waves and surges of an ocean of light, we see and know each other, and what spirit each is of. Who can tell the grounds of his knowledge of the character of the several individuals in his circle of friends? No Man. Yet their acts and words do not disappoint him” (CW 2:169).

In *Essays*, Emerson offers more detailed descriptions of the conditions that make up individual constitutions than he does in the sermons – he speaks, for instance, of the effects of “succession” (CW 2:160) in “The Over-Soul” and of “moods” (CW 2:182) in “Circles.” The trend continues in subsequent works like *Essays: Second Series* (1844)

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and *The Conduct of Life* (1860). Nevertheless, the basic structure of self-reliance in *Essays* is that of the homilies.

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Notes

My sincere thanks to David Robinson for his response to an earlier draft of this essay. I have learned more about Emerson from Professor Robinson's books and from conversations with him than from anyone else.

¹ Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861* (Harvard UP, 1970), 116.

² *Ibid.*, 45-59.

³ David Robinson, *Apostle of Culture: Emerson as Preacher and Lecturer* (U of Pennsylvania P, 1982), 22-23.

⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 4 Volumes, ed. Albert J. von Frank *et al.* (U of Missouri P, 1989), 2:264; cited hereafter as CS.

⁵ According to Robinson, Emerson's rejection of the exclusive authority of Jesus was "complete" by July of 1835. See *Apostle*, 55-60.

⁶ There is at least one precedent for this argument. In Sermon XC, delivered on 3 October 1830, Emerson writes that even "the most obscure and ignorant wretch" can see both the merits and weaknesses of Newton, Franklin, and Washington because "there is a greater man than any that has ever lived" in his heart (CS 2:266). As Robinson notes, the ideal man that allows each person to judge the character of others is a version of the moral sense. See *Apostle*, 54.

⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Robert Spiller, Alfred Ferguson, *et al.* (Harvard UP, 1971-2013), 2:82; cited hereafter as CW.

⁸ I am indebted to the work of Stanley Cavell for my understanding of Emerson's theory of self-reliance as the enactment of one's

“constitution,” the transformation of one’s limitations, both here and in my earlier reading of Sermon CXLIII. See Stanley Cavell, *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*, ed. David Justin Hodge (Stanford UP, 2003), 10-19, 20-32, 59-82, 141-70, 192-214.

