INTRODUCTION

Emerson on Creativity in Thought and Action

The opening essay of Emerson's 1860 book, *The Conduct of Life*,[1] posed, in that fateful year of threatening Civil War and disunion, the philosophical problem of human freedom and fate. The essay "Fate" is followed in the present book by a series of essays on related themes, including: "Power," "Wealth," "Culture," "Worship," "Beauty" and "Illusions." The central question of the volume is, "How shall I live?" Appreciating both our freedom and its limits, we understand the vitality of power to acquire what wealth is needed to scale the corrections and heights of culture and worship, find beauty in life and human society, wary still of the illusions. Overall, the book is a call for creative solutions. Yet the nation, in the year of Abraham Lincoln's election, seemed fated to war or disunion in spite of all its dedication to freedom.

1. Fate, Thought, and Freedom

The opening essay elaborates the preliminary point that "in our first steps to gain our wishes, we come upon immovable limitations." That there are limitations to the fulfillment of our wishes and desires, no one doubts. Yet, these *are* limitations to existing powers to fulfill our wishes and desires. Where we find limitations to power, then we find power, too. "If we must accept Fate," Emerson says, "we are not less compelled to affirm liberty, the significance of the individual, the grandeur of duty, the power of character." Limitation also has its limits.

"Every spirit makes its house," he says, affirming freedom and power, though "afterwards the house confines the spirit." So, we need on occasion to get out of or transcend that self-fabricated house and explore the larger world and its potentialities. Emerson recognizes that every solution brings new problems. The essay "Fate" is, overall, a forceful affirmation of human free-

1. First published in Boston by Tricknor and Fields in 1860.

dom, though it dwells on all those elements of life which bring us to doubt and hesitate. Emerson's aim is to find a practical balance.[2]

"We have to consider two things: power and circumstance." What power we will have depends partly on recognizing the circumstances which confine and define it. "The Circumstance is Nature. Nature is, what you may do. There is much you may not. We have two things, the circumstance, and the life. Once we thought, positive power was all. Now we learn, that negative power, or circumstance, is half." Or, in more personal terms, "A man's power is hooped in by a necessity, which, by many experiments, he touches on every side, until he learns its arc." The extent of our freedom is both a philosophical and an experimental question, and since we ever lack omniscience and omnipotence, the experiments can never completely cease. "Fate, then, is a name for facts not yet passed under the fire of thought; for causes which are unpenetrated." Though thought penetrates or dissolves the impact of fate as non-comprehended circumstances, circumstances both old and new continue adamantly to limit the sphere of freedom. We never achieve complete power or freedom in our growth: there are always things we can do and others we cannot.

A key to Emerson's solution to the problems of fate and freedom is found at the end of the poem, "Fate," which prefaces the essay. "The foresight that awaits," he says there, restating the prior conclusion suggested in the poem, "Is the same Genius that creates." The poem links freedom to the human power of creative thought, which allows us to understand lawful regularity, foresee events, and sometimes exercise control of them. The conclusion of the essay is summarized in the opening poem:

> Delicate omens traced in air
> To the lone bard true witness bare;
> Birds with auguries on their wings
> Chanted undeceiving things
> Him to beckon, him to warn;
> Well might then the poet scorn
> To learn of scribe or courier
> Hints writ in vaster character;
> And on his mind, at dawn of day,
> Soft shadows of the evening lay.
> For the prevision is allied

2. Misunderstandings of Emerson on this point are important in the relative neglect of his later work. See for instance, O.W. Holmes, *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1885), p. 230, where begins a history of misunderstandings.

> Unto the thing so signified;
> Or say, the foresight that awaits
> Is the same Genius that creates.

The poem is not the argument, nor is it the inquiry on fate and freedom. The poem summarizes and illuminates the inquiry. It may plausibly be thought to illuminate the point that our inquiries are central in the practical problems of freedom and fate.

The perspective is complex: "even thought itself is not above Fate: that too must act according to eternal laws, and all that is willful and fantastic in it is in opposition to its fundamental essence." Thus, Emerson turns in degree from his musing cultivation of romantic insights into nature to "learn of scribe or courier," to his study, for "previsions." There he looks to find "Hints writ in vaster character." There is a strong anti-nominalist theme in Emerson's philosophy. Creative thought requires more disciplined method, though Emerson remains a "poet-philosopher," and something of the secularized preacher, in his exposition and in his rhetoric. He never departs from his conviction of the value of an artful style, immersed in genuine piety and religious rhetoric, yet he insists that there are truths to be discovered. The aim of avoiding the merely fantastic requires observance of "eternal laws of thought." These, too, structure that "soul which animates Nature;" and "all successful men" are "*causationists,*" believing "there was not a weak or a cracked link in the chain that joins the first and last of things."

"Intellect annuls Fate," says Emerson, partly as we may suppose, by breaking down heretofore unpenetrated circumstance into a collection of laws, regularities, and facts. "So far as a man thinks, he is free." Yet this freedom is always limited however much it may expand. No genuine intellect ignores confining realities, including the need of preparation and study. "Just as much intellect as you add, so much organic power. He who sees through the design, presides over it, and must will that which must be. We sit and rule, and, though we sleep, our dream will come to pass. Our thought, though it were only an hour old, affirms an oldest necessity, not to be separated from thought, and not to be separated from will." Clinging to our insights, our will and character are molded by the reality uncovered. "Of two men, each obeying his own thought, he whose thought is deepest will be the strongest character." Thought makes for freedom and power but also for character: a person who is equal to and can better remake and withstand confining circumstance.

"There are times, indeed," wrote philosopher John Dewey in 1903, "when one is inclined to regard Emerson's whole work as a hymn to intelligence, a paean to the all-creating, all-disturbing power of thought;" Dewey recognized the "final word of Emerson's philosophy," "the identity of Being, unqualified and immutable, with Character."[3] By thoughtfully building character, we acquire needed powers to control circumstances. For character is disposition to act and an integration of knowledge and emotion manifested in disciplined will.

Emerson argues as follows: "But insight is not will, nor is affection will. Perception is cold, and goodness dies in wishes; as Voltaire said, 'tis the misfortune of worthy people that they are cowards.'" Affection must be modified by thought and insight: "There must be a fusion of these two to generate the energy of will. There can be no driving force, except through the conversion of the man into his will, making him the will, and the will him." Yet this conversion is open to anyone who can set aside the miscellany of activity to focus on a purpose. "This is Emerson's revelation:" said philosopher William James also in 1903: "The point of any pen can be an epitome of reality; the commonest person's act, if genuinely actuated, can lay hold of eternity."[4]

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) exercised a formative influence on American society and culture as the central figure of the nineteenth-century New England renaissance. He was born in Boston, the son and grandson of Unitarian ministers, and he trained for the same profession. Educated at the Harvard Divinity School, he was ordained and became a Boston pastor. But he left the ministry, because he felt himself unable, in good conscience, to administer the Lord's Supper. He wrote, lectured and traveled widely both in the United States and Europe, and in later years he ventured as far as Egypt. His success as a writer was phenomenal both in the U.S. and in Great Britain. He made his living by delivering public lectures and by writing.

2. Departures from Transcendentalism?

Though Emerson used it himself, "transcendentalism" is in some ways a misleading term for his philosophy. It better characterizes his early thought. Certainly, Emerson sought to transcend some things in American society. He

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3. John Dewey 1903, "Emerson—The Philosopher of Democracy," reprinted in Dewey, *The Middle Works*, Vol. 3. See pp. 187 and 192.
4. William James 1903, "Address to the Emerson Centenary at Concord," published in James 1911, *Memories and Studies*, pp. 19-34. See the final page.

was aware, too, of transcending his own prior views—going beyond them. We do well to translate the Latin-derived word, back into more vernacular Anglo-Saxon terms to appreciate what persists through the turns and developments of Emerson's thought. To "transcend" means, to "overcome," and we should ask about what Emerson sought to overcome. Moral purpose is central in Emerson's philosophy.

The word "Transcendentalism" is borrowed from Kant, indirectly as inspired by Coleridge.[5] Emerson was never properly a Kantian. What the word meant to Emerson, when he used it, was a commitment to Idealism. Emerson was both an "Idealist" and a self-defined "transcendentalist" in 1841, at the time he published his first series of *Essays*. He says so clearly in the following passage from "The Transcendentalist:"

> What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842. As thinkers, mankind have ever divided into two sects, Materialists and Idealists; the first class founding on experience, the second on consciousness; the first class beginning to think from the data of the senses, the second class perceive that the senses are not final, and say, the senses give us representations of things, but what are the things themselves, they cannot tell. The materialist insists on facts, on history, on the force of circumstances, and the animal wants of man; the idealist on the power of Thought and of Will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture. These two modes of thinking are both natural, but the idealist contends that his way of thinking is in higher nature. He concedes all that the other affirms, admits the impressions of sense, admits their coherency, their use and beauty, and then asks the materialist for his grounds of assurance that things are as his senses represent them. But I, he says, affirm facts not affected by the illusions of sense, facts which are of the same nature as the faculty which reports them, and not liable to doubt; facts which in their first appearance to us assume a native superiority to material facts, degrading these into a language by which the first are to be spoken; facts which it only needs a retirement from the senses to discern. Every materialist will be an idealist; but an idealist can never go backward to be a materialist.[6]

Fundamentally, Emerson's transcendentalism is set in opposition to "materialism" and the empiricist's emphasis on experience and sense perception. If we are now inclined to agree that "the senses are not final," then I think the

5. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), English poet, critic, and philosopher. Coleridge's books, *The Friend* and *Biographia Literaria* were particularly important for Emerson. See the discussion in Flower and Murphey 1977, *A History of Philosophy in America*, Vol. 1, pp. 408f.
6. Emerson 1842, "The Transcendentalist," reprinted in Stroh and Callaway 2000, *American Ethics*, pp. 117-122. See pp. 117-118.

most we will want to say in our contemporary empiricisms is that sense experience requires some interpretation. This is far from claiming that the senses cannot tell us about "the things themselves," though it does allow for occasional recognition of the "illusions of sense." If, in some tension with the quotation above, we equally accept no indubitable deliverances of reason and emphasize the possible delusions of interpretation, then in what ways should we continue to find Emerson's philosophy and his "transcending" of sensual materialism of interest?

We have room to think that Emerson overcame his own transcendentalism, though he retained the moral urgency of his dedication to overcome the moral materialism in which he saw the nation captured, say, a "nation conceived in liberty" to use Lincoln's phrase, but maintaining and cultivating pernicious financial interests and investments in human slavery. Though "the materialist insists on facts, on history, on the force of circumstances, and the animal wants of man," as Emerson saw the matter in 1842, he too came to emphasize these things, notably in his essay "Fate," addressing the "conduct of life." He admits yet seeks to counter-balance this emphasis on circumstance.

Part of the contemporary and systematic interest of the present book, then, is to understand how Emerson seeks to combine his later emphasis on circumstance while preserving his contrary early stress, so far as possible, "on the power of Thought and of Will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture." Emerson gives us many a thread to follow in his development, and we need to understand in more concrete terms what he sought to overcome. In his "Lecture on the Times," from 1841, Emerson's social-intellectual aims stand out. He challenges a conservative establishment, that moneyed conservatism which says:

> 'I will hold fast; and to whom I will, will I give; and whom I will, will I exclude and starve:' so says Conservatism; and all the children of men attack the colossus in their youth, and all, or all but a few, bow before it when they are old. A necessity not yet commanded, a negative imposed on the will of man by his condition a deficiency in his force, is the foundation on which it rests. Let this side be fairly stated. Meantime, on the other part, arises Reform, and offers the sentiment of Love as an overmatch to this material might. I wish to consider well this affirmative side, which has a loftier port and reason than heretofore, which encroaches on the other every day, puts it out

> of countenance, out of reason, and out of temper, and leaves it nothing but silence and possession.[7]

Has the prospect of reform only "love" to offer as a weapon in opposition to this "material might?" While Emerson never wavers on the value of love, he also mentions "reason" here, and the Emersonian philosophy of transcendentalism takes a particular slant in understanding the term. "Reason," in a tradition following Coleridge,[8] is contrasted with the philosophy of common-sense and the empiricist-realist common-sense "understanding," a term strongly related to the Lockean tradition established by the American Revolution. Emerson's view is that the Revolution had devolved into a materialistic and conservative establishment oriented chiefly to gaining and preserving wealth. This conservatism was blocking the road to reform needed to avoid the catastrophe to come after mid-century. If we come to "bow before" the colossus of wealth and social influence, then we lack sufficient force to oppose this defining circumstance of our problems. Emersonian "reason" is to overcome our common-sense understanding, where it is compromised and where it preserves problems along with established positions and advantage.

Continuing the passage above from 1841, Emerson promises a discussion of the contemporary conflict between "aristocracy" and "transcendentalism:"

> The fact of aristocracy, with its two weapons of wealth and manners, is as commanding a feature of the nineteenth century, and the American republic, as of old Rome, or modern England. The reason and influence of wealth, the aspect of philosophy and religion, and the tendencies which have acquired the name of Transcendentalism in Old and New England; the aspect of poetry, as the exponent and interpretation of these things; the fuller development and the freer play of Character as a social and political agent;—these and other related topics will in turn come to be considered.[9]

To some people, if poetry, literature, revitalized religion, love, and even Emersonian reason sufficed to overcome such an established order and its mate-

7. Emerson 1841, "Lecture on the Times," in *The Works of R. W. Emerson*, Vol. 1, *Miscellanies*, pp. 211-236. See p. 212.
8. See Emerson 1836, "Modern Aspects of Letters," where he says of Coleridge: "He has made admirable definitions, and drawn indelible lines between things heretofore confounded. He thought and thought truly that all confusion of thought tended to confusion in action; and said that he had never observed an abuse of terms obtain currency without being followed by some practical error. He has enriched the English language and the English mind with an explanation of the object of philosophy; of the all important distinction between Reason and Understanding; the distinction of an idea and a conception; between Genius and Talent; between Fancy and Imagination; of the nature and end of Poetry; of the Idea of a State."
9. Emerson 1841, "Lecture on the Times," p. 212-213.

rial incentives, that would be a miracle. But we need not suppose something supernatural. Viewed more naturalistically, what is required is more like a turn of conviction, a moral and cultural conversion, and shifts in public opinion, which finally draw needed political and social consequences and act on them. Human beings organize and re-organize themselves not by material incentives alone.

It is not that Emerson thought reform does without incentives. In his "Address on the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies" (1844), he notes that "in 1791, three hundred thousand persons in Britain pledged themselves to abstain from all articles of Island produce. The planters were obliged to give way; and in 1807, on the twenty-fifth March, the bill passed and the slave trade was abolished."[10] Great Britain had been aroused to action and reform once the horrid facts of the slave trade became generally known. But the result did not come about without public action and economic pressures.

Emerson included a significant practical orientation in his moral idealism. Still, from a more philosophical perspective, there is good reason to look into what became of Emerson's more mystical, metaphysical, and epistemic doctrines in the progression of thought which brought him to write "Fate" and *The Conduct of Life*. That Emerson persisted and developed in his moral idealism is beyond doubt. But what became of the typical philosophical doctrines of transcendentalism in the time between *Nature* and the first series of *Essays* in the early 1840s and the publication of *The Conduct of Life* in 1860? The words "transcendental" and "transcendentalism" are not to be found in the present work. There are certainly hints along the way of a more naturalistic and pragmatic, esoteric doctrine which yet speaks Emerson's distinctive religious language. "The soul which animates Nature," he says in "Behavior," in the present work, "is not less significantly published in the figure, movement, and gesture of animated bodies, than in its last vehicle of articulate speech."[11] The moral idealist is an astute literary observer of manners and comportment; and the emphasis on intuition arising directly from nature is balanced by good efforts to interpret human society. Early on, Emerson looked more to the natural surroundings, since a reorientation and adaptation of traditional European thought was needed in the new American environment. Later, Emerson is more

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10. Emerson 1844, "Address on the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies," in Gougeon and Myerson Eds, 1995, *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, p. 13.
11. See "Behavior," in the present volume, p. 85.

concerned with culture and cultures in comparison—partly from the requirements of confirming his comparative evaluations of culture.

Though Emerson is not a technical philosopher or a philosopher of the sort which the twentieth century has often taught us to expect, one basic tendency of his thought is toward an idealist metaphysics in which soul and intuition, or inspiration, are central. The new American experiment needed every idea within its reach. Taking a practical and democratic, yet poetic interest in all of nature and in individuals of every walk of life, Emerson stresses the potentiality for genius and creativity in each person. It is a source of creative insight within, which yet speaks to us from Nature's inspirations, and which Emerson identified as Divine. Emerson was concerned with nature and with the observation of natural phenomena. However, he was not centrally concerned, in his more poetic moods, to test his insights and interpretations by reference to predictions or systematic collection of observations, since according to Transcendentalism, all facts and perception require interpretation. Moreover, such interpretation is not dictated to us by either fact or perception. This reasoning is the basis for any rationalism which fails to find the sources of our ideas of perfection, or beauty, or lawful necessity in sense experience. Yet we find in *The Conduct of Life* that Emerson's more youthful idealism has come down to earth and come to grapple with circumstances.

Emerson's transcendentalism is an idealist pantheism—though not without a more naturalistic and humanistic tendency. We often find in his work praise for Plato as well as the German Idealists. He says in "The Transcendentalist," not leaving any doubt concerning his early idealism, that "Mind is the only reality of which men and all other natures are better or worse reflectors."[12]

This early rationalistic idealism is tempered in the essay "Worship" in the present book: "The religion which is to guide and fulfill the present and coming ages," says Emerson "whatever else it be, must be intellectual. The scientific mind must have a faith which is science." Such a "scientific" religion or faith in science would surely not be content with poetic inspiration, thought to emanate directly from the World-Soul, as a basis for belief. Yet the point stands in some conflict with the philosophical underpinnings of transcendentalism: the self-sufficiency of "reason" in contrast with the scientific and common-sense understanding. If we once see the insufficiency of pure "reason" in isolation from the common-sense understanding and empirical study, then there is no other source from which to hope to correct the delusions of reason or faith, or of common

12. Emerson 1842, "The Transcendentalist," reprinted in Emerson 1971, Alfred R. Ferguson (ed.) *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. I, p. 203.

sense, except that we rely on growing experience. Relying on experience, in contrast to a self-sufficient "reason," we still have room for an evolving higher criticism of accepted beliefs and values.

"If one would study his own time," writes Emerson in the opening of "Fate," "it must be by this method of taking up in turn each of the leading topics which belong to our scheme of human life, and, by firmly stating all that is agreeable to experience on one, and doing the same justice to the opposing facts in the others, the true limitations will appear." Not intuition or inspiration is called for here, but "method" and reliance on "experience." This is needed in order that "Any excess of emphasis, on one part, would be corrected, and a just balance would be made." Facing the threat of civil war, an understanding of American society could not plausibly be based on unaided inspiration or intuition. Still Emerson's method is in fact more literary than it is scientific. He consults the recorded wisdom of ages gone by and seeks reconciliation. Insight and inspiration survive, in the later views, as a faithfulness to the perspective at which we arrive. He writes as follows in the essay "Worship:"

> There is a principle which is the basis of things, which all speech aims to say, and all action to evolve, a simple, quiet, undescribed, undescribable presence, dwelling very peacefully in us, our rightful lord: we are not to do, but to let do; not to work, but to be worked upon; and to this homage there is a consent of all thoughtful and just men in all ages and conditions. To this sentiment belong vast and sudden enlargements of power.[13]

Though the point is expressed in Emerson's religious language, this "presence" is what we would otherwise understand as the inner source of our hypotheses and interpretations, including those which arise as we attempt to reconcile conflicting positions or themes in tension and contradiction. To understand a problem we need to arrive at an organizing idea, proposed solution, or hypothesis; and we need this organizing idea actually to organize the material under study. It is "the rightful lord" of the material to be organized, of the intellectual problem which is addressed. It cannot be something which we merely impose on the material. As Emerson puts the matter, "we are not to do, but to let do." The idea comes to us, and it must actually fit the need. We must consent to our own insight, and this is the root and basis of Emerson's method. It is only if we regard such insight, the solution or resolution or organizing idea at which we arrive as infallible and not open to revision in light of new problems, or new elements of former problems, that we fall into a kind of rationalism or *a priori*

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13. See "Worship," in the present volume, p. 106.

method which feels itself secure in disregarding appeal to experience. Emerson, in contrast, teaches intellectual honesty, in the light of evolving experience, as the basic religious and intellectual value.

There is also always moral purpose to the intellectual task at hand. Emerson complains in the essay "Beauty," below, against science lacking such purpose: "Science in England, in America, is jealous of theory, hates the name of love and moral purpose. There's a revenge for this inhumanity." The revenge is in the defects of the products and in the peccant narrowness of the developed persons following such practice. Yet, though moral purpose is needed, such moral purpose is not regarded as unchanging or rigidly set. "Religion or worship," says Emerson, "is the attitude of those who see this unity, intimacy, and sincerity; who see that, against all appearances, the nature of things works for truth and right forever." The human mind is part of the world, we might say, and however this works, "it works for truth and right." We should aim for and act in the confidence of this aim. Emerson reflects the Enlightenment values of his Unitarian predecessors, but he goes further:

> We say, the old forms of religion decay, and that a skepticism devastates the community. I do not think it can be cured or stayed by any modification of theologic creeds, much less by theologic discipline. The cure for false theology is mother-wit. Forget your books and traditions, and obey your moral perceptions at this hour.[14]

Your moral perceptions "at this hour" may not be the same as those at which you later arrive, but to get from point A to point B, you must start where you stand. We cannot do without our moral purpose any more than we can do without intellectual virtues. This combination of moral and intellectual virtues defines Emerson's relation to religious tradition. "Let us have nothing now which is not its own evidence," he says; since "there is surely enough for the heart and imagination in the religion itself. Let us not be pestered with assertions and half-truths, with emotions and snuffle."

3. Faith and Divine Providence

Along with his emphasis on intellectual and moral virtues and practice, Emerson also has a more nearly orthodox and traditional side to his religious thought which arises most directly from his early essay on "Compensation." The doctrine of compensation is a doctrine of balances and acceptance of life, and a doctrine of cosmic justice, not unconnected with what any Pastor or Rabbi

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14. "Worship," p. 107.

might tell you about the experience of loss and recovery, fall and re-birth, and related themes. Emerson preaches a religion of hope, acceptable in many ways to his more traditionally religious countrymen. But in the present book, this teaching takes a realistic turn to acknowledge and emphasize the terrors and harshness of life. He writes much to this effect in "Fate:"

> Providence has a wild, rough, incalculable road to its end, and it is of no use to try to whitewash its huge, mixed instrumentalities, or to dress up that terrific benefactor in a clean shirt and white neck cloth of a student in divinity.[15]

Truculence in the course of Providence is part of the traditional theme of the problem of evil. If God is all-good and all-powerful, and creator of the world, then why is there so much pain, suffering and evil in this world—so much ferocity, cruelty and savagery? Emerson does not deny the evidence of evil in the world upon which the argument rests. Nor does he deny the traditional assumptions about the power and goodness of Divinity. For Emerson, the world as it is "is best,"—so far. Evil, pain and suffering in this world are among the instrumentalities of the Divine Providence, the means employed to bring about what is needed and wanted and better. But expense of means to arrive at an end is a proof of circumstance, constraint, and even "fate." That "mind is the only reality" is no longer clearly true. At least it is not mind as unqualified will or willfulness, unconstrained by law. Providence itself must go to some expense of means to reach its ends, and if even Divine Providence is constrained by expense of means to deal with circumstances, we are certainly in no better position. Emerson can only plead, in the face of this problem, that an expense of means to deal with circumstance belongs to the divine "eternal laws" of the world itself. That is substantially his view.

Still, Emerson writes: "Fate involves the melioration. No statement of the Universe can have any soundness, which does not admit its ascending effort. The direction of the whole, and of the parts, is toward benefit, and in proportion to the health." Essentially, this is a doctrine of cosmic progress, and it functions in Emerson's thought to encourage our efforts in the right directions. He does not see this message of melioration and the need of ameliorative efforts as inconsistent with recognizing the facts as they are:

> I see not why we should give ourselves such sanctified airs. If the Divine Providence has hid from men neither disease, nor deformity, nor corrupt society, but has stated itself out in passions, in war, in trade, in the love of power and pleasure, in hunger and need, in tyrannies, literatures, and arts,—let us not be so nice that we cannot write

15. See "Fate," in the present volume, p. 5.

> these facts down coarsely as they stand, or doubt but there is a counter-statement as ponderous, which we can arrive at, and which, being put, will make all square. The solar system has no anxiety about its reputation, and the credit of truth and honesty is as safe; nor have I any fear that a skeptical bias can be given by leaning hard on the sides of fate, of practical power, or of trade, which the doctrine of Faith cannot down-weigh.[16]

Subsequent philosophy in America has taken a clue from Emerson's emphasis on the need for ameliorative efforts, even where the faith in an all-powerful intelligence in the world, or the inevitability of moral progress, has not been upheld. Later meliorism, in contrast with optimism, bases hope not in the inevitability of moral progress and improvements but instead in the possibility of improvements. There is also much attention to empirical conditions and methods which allow us to track and project tendencies and propensities of action and activity based, in part, on our commonalities of ethics, affinity, tradition and ethnicities. Recognizing our problems, as Emerson recommends, we may see the need for improvements and sometimes discover the means—even for those lacking faith in an all-powerful intelligence to see to and guarantee final outcomes. Propensity to self-correction and moral compensation exist in any living culture—much as they exist in any healthy psyche.

4. Culture, Worship and Illusions

Can we reasonably expect that all our efforts and projects in life, or human life itself, will always turn out for the best in the end, or in the long-run? Though expressing his faith in religious and pious terms, Emerson always allows that we are subject to illusions and errors of belief. Can we, then, be sure of Emerson's own optimistic faith in the human capability to overcome the stings of circumstance and the limitations of fate? Though intent on advancing his own distinctive views of the matter, Emerson leaves possibilities of doubt. In the final essay of the book, he writes of a kingdom of illusions:

> In this kingdom of illusions we grope eagerly for stays and foundations. There is none but a strict and faithful dealing at home, and a severe barring out of all duplicity or illusion there. Whatever games are played with us, we must play no games with ourselves, but deal in our privacy with the last honesty and truth. I look upon the simple and childish virtues of veracity and honesty as the root of all that is sublime in character. Speak as you think, be what you are, pay your debts of all kinds. I prefer to be owned as sound and solvent, and my word as good as my bond, and to be what cannot

16. See "Worship," in the present volume, p. 101.

> be skipped, or dissipated, or undermined, to all the *éclat*[17] in the universe. This reality is the foundation of friendship, religion, poetry, and art. At the top or at the bottom of all illusions, I set the cheat which still leads us to work and live for appearances, in spite of our conviction, in all sane hours, that it is what we really are that avails with friends, with strangers, and with fate or fortune.[18]

How are we to avoid or escape this kingdom of illusions? Might we be sometimes condemned, in spite of all our progress, to fail to escape the essential constraints and limitations of circumstance? What are the proper and appropriate foundations of our efforts and inquiries? How do we know what we can accomplish and what we cannot?

Emerson says that there are no better foundations than intellectual honesty: "A strict and faithful dealing at home, and a severe barring out of all duplicity or illusion there." This simple honesty opens up the power in nature and in mankind by which we think, discover, progress, correct our errors and even change our desires and aims. It is the source of creativity in thought and action.[19] It puts us in the best position, too, to benefit from and appreciate the contributions of others. "This reality is the foundation of friendship, religion, poetry, and art," says Emerson. We are set on the pursuit of culture, by means of which we may fine-tune or revise our success, put our wealth and growing power to the best uses, find reverence for life, and better appreciate its beauty. There is little guarantee for ambition in this approach to life, but we stand to make the best use of the opportunities actually encountered.

5. Double Consciousness

It is worth examining Emerson, early and late, on the notion of "double consciousness," since this idea enters with great significance into the method which he expounds in *The Conduct of Life*. To see the full force of the later doctrine, however, we must first understand something of his early thoughts on the topic. In "The Transcendentalist," Emerson complains of a "double consciousness"

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17. "*Ėclat,*" French: Grand appearance, shattering affect, sparkle, or pomp.
18 See "Illusions," in the present volume, p. 161.
19 Compare Emerson on the creativity of the poet in his 1875 book, *Letters and Social Aims*, "Do they think there is chance or willfulness in what he sees and tells? To be sure, we demand of him what he demands of himself,—veracity, first of all. But with that he is the lawgiver, as being an exact reporter of the essential law. He knows that he did not make his thought,—no, his thought made him, and made the sun and the stars. Is the solar system good art and architecture? the same wise achievement is in the human brain also, can you only wile it from interference and marring." See the opening essay, "Poetry and Imagination."

which appears as a typical romantic dilemma. The problem is to understand how one might escape this double consciousness, and it is a source of no little frustration and doubt:

> Much of our reading, much of our labor, seems mere waiting: it was not that we were born for. Any other could do it as well, or better. So little skill enters into these works, so little do they mix with the divine life, that it really signifies little what we do, whether we turn a grindstone, or ride, or run, or make fortunes, or govern the state. The worst feature of this double consciousness is, that the two lives, of the understanding and of the soul, which we lead, really show very little relation to each other, never meet and measure each other: one prevails now, all buzz and din; and the other prevails then, all infinitude and paradise; and, with the progress of life, the two discover no greater disposition to reconcile themselves.[20]

On the one hand is a consciousness of "the divine life," of "infinitude and paradise." This is the source of inspiration from within or from without. The trouble is that it seems to have no significant relationship to every-day life, the common-sense understanding, and the work-a-day life—"all buzz and din." This "double consciousness" is a confession of dualism. The life of the soul seems to have no significant relation to what we do in the world. Our work is "not what we were born for," says Emerson, and, implicitly, one may wonder, from this perspective, why we are born to it at all

The doctrine is very different in Emerson's "Fate." Where it had been a problematic duality, it now appears as a solution to life's problems. There is, he says, "One key, one solution to the mysteries of human condition" there is "one solution to the old knots of fate, freedom, and foreknowledge," and this is the propounding, namely, of the double consciousness."[21]

> A man must ride alternately on the horses of his private and his public nature, as the equestrians in the circus throw themselves nimbly from horse to horse, or plant one foot on the back of one, and the other foot on the back of the other. So when a man is the victim of his fate, has sciatica in his loins, and cramp in his mind; a club-foot and a club in his wit; a sour face, and a selfish temper; a strut in his gait, and a conceit in his affection; or is ground to powder by the vice of his race;—he is to rally on his relation to the Universe, which his ruin benefits. Leaving the demon who suffers, he is to take sides with the Deity who secures universal benefit by his pain.[22]

We have each, Emerson says, both a "private" and "a public nature." We are reminded here of Emerson's emphasis and alterations between "Society and

20 Emerson 1842, "The Transcendentalist," p. 213.
21. See "Fate," in the present volume, p. 23.
22. See "Fate," p. 23.

Solitude." There is no solution on either side alone, but only in going back and forth. We must change perspective between that of common sense and every-day life, on the one hand, and private thought on the other—thus gaining insight from the disparity and conflict of perspectives. If your private view leaves you in defeat and ashes, then it is time to switch and take up the case of the opposition which benefits from your defeat and suffering. Admit your errors, when you see them, and join the opposition. In that way, you may also benefit from the defeat of your error. Emerson continues:

> To offset the drag of temperament and race, which pulls down, learn this lesson, namely, that by the cunning co-presence of two elements, which is throughout nature, whatever lames or paralyzes you, draws in with it the divinity, in some form, to repay. A good intention clothes itself with sudden power. When a god wishes to ride, any chip or pebble will bud and shoot out winged feet, and serve him for a horse.
>
> Let us build altars to the Blessed Unity which holds nature and souls in perfect solution, and compels every atom to serve a universal end.[23]

This is Emerson's doctrine of compensation and cosmic justice in another guise. Whatever pulls you down, whatever "lames or paralyzes you," benefits another, and if you join with that other, then you can benefit from the "compensation" yourself. In this way, you can continue to "serve a universal end." But, if we see, in some tension with Emerson's teaching, that there is little automatic in justice, that even the benefits which may ultimately arise from loss depend on our ability to greave (instead of running on into obsession), then so is it, also in every generalization of the point which Emerson explores. If there is no automatic compensation, and justice depends on our continuing to work to distinguish the "better and worse" among possibilities and human potentialities, the point still remains that internal honesty and rigorous intellectual and moral integrity may hold the solution even for those illusions which arise from our occasional stubbornness and blindness. From intellectual self-reliance, we may become our own best critics. We can understand in these terms how Emerson, the private scholar, could become the conscience of a nation willing and able to argue with great force and act with great masses in favor of the abolition of slavery.

"A good intention clothes itself with sudden power," says Emerson; and "when a god wishes to ride, any chip or pebble will bud and shoot out winged feet, and serve him for a horse." We do not know in any dependable

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23. See "Fate," p. 23.

way which side of the double consciousness may hold greater benefit on any given occasion, yet we know that creativity arises out of just this tension.

6. Historical Context: America, Power, and Culture

Writing to Thomas Carlyle in April 1854, Emerson thought that the British writer should come and see America, which was "growing furiously" and among its other attractions featured "wealth … on a new scale." "New Kansas new Nebraska [are] looming up in these days." Congress was about to decide on the question of slavery in Kansas and Nebraska. Though Emerson focuses on the attraction of American growth and vitality, he is not optimistic that the politicians in Washington will be able to solve the problems outstanding. If "the politicians shall be sodden, the states escape, please God!" Carlyle should come to see the events unfolding on such a grand continental scale. The deeper moral issue is to be considered: "The fight of slave and freeman drawing nearer, the question is properly, whether slavery or whether freedom shall be abolished. Come and see."[24] Emerson was keenly aware of the state of American politics and the long development of its festering sectional divisions, which had only been exacerbated by the competition in adding new slave states and new free states—at least since the time of the Missouri compromise of 1820. He knew, as Abraham Lincoln was later to put the matter, that the nation "could not long exist half slave and half free," and that "a house divided against itself cannot stand." Emerson did not emphasize his political opinions in his books. He did, however, provide the following hint of his positions in the essay on "Culture" in the present book:

> 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 up-hill 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.[25]

The political issues and problems might turn out in various ways, but Emerson was sure that there was a higher court of appeal than what we find in politics. "Politics is an after-work," he says, "a poor patching," and this is because politics is predominantly a working out of habits and values already established and therefore already represented firmly in political councils. No matter how

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24. See Emerson's letter to Carlyle of 11 March 1854.
25. See "Culture," in the present volume, p. 69.

perfect and desirable our systems of representation of established values, politics cannot fix the conflicts and defects of those established values and habits of action. Our "root and branch" political reforms therefore remain, too often, superficial, when measured against the genuine depth of our problems. War may indeed become inevitable in such circumstances, and that was how Emerson viewed the nation in the 1850s as he developed and wrote out his book on *The Conduct of Life.*

Far be it from Emerson, then, to want to subject American growth and economic vitality to a superior political control sufficient to dam it up. Instead we find him addressing education and culture as the final arbiters of success. "Whilst all the world is in pursuit of power, and of wealth as a means of power, culture corrects the theory of success."[26] That is why Emerson understands culture as largely a matter of our pursuit of higher values. "A man is the prisoner of his power," he says, and culture is needed to free the human being, or the nation, from the monomania of specific powers and their visible and obvious outcomes. So, for example, if America is gifted in making money and producing economic growth, then we should be most wary of excesses in just these matters. We must ask what is being sacrificed or ignored.

Emerson's image of America and of its problems in familiar, even after more than 150 years. "A topical memory makes" of us, "an almanac;" while "a talent for debate," tends to make merely "a disputant." "Skill to get money makes" of us "a miser, that is, a beggar," according to Emerson, though "Culture reduces these inflammations by invoking the aid of other powers against the dominant talent, and by appealing to the rank of powers. It watches success."[27] If we ignore or disregard this control by culture over power and "success," then we evade deeper realities and store up problems for ourselves and others.

Such was the unhappy course which brought America to its great mid-nineteenth-century tragedies: something was lacking and defective in our conduct of life. Instead of directly addressing the consequences in political debates, Emerson aimed to make up the deeper defects and omissions. However, a section of the "Lecture on Slavery" from 1855 discusses the political compromise concerning slavery in the Constitution. You might argue that the American Revolution would have been impossible without the South, and that action against slavery, in 1776, would have been an impediment to independence. In his original draft of the Declaration of Independ-

26. See "Culture," p. 65.
27. See "Culture," p. 65.

ence, Thomas Jefferson had included a complaint against King George III's forcing the slave trade upon the colonies. But this was removed from the final document.

The arguments from the necessities of war do not clearly extend to decisions made in the constitutional convention. Emerson argues, persuasively, that other options existed. (It is worth recalling that Jefferson and John Adams were not at the convention; they were away on foreign assignments.) Speaking of the Constitutional Convention, Emerson says:

> The fathers, in July 1787, consented to adopt population as the basis of representation, and to count only three-fifths of the slaves, and to concede the reclamation of fugitive slaves;—for the consideration, that there should be no slavery in the Northwestern Territory. They agreed to this false basis of representation and to this criminal complicity of restoring fugitives: and the splendor of the bribe, namely, the magnificent prosperity of America from 1787, is their excuse for the crime. They should have refused it at the risk of making no Union.[28]

The view is that the decisions on slavery at the Constitutional Convention were short-sighted. Emerson sees them as primarily motivated by economic considerations. The Northwest Ordinance, forbidding slavery north of the Ohio and east of the Mississippi was adopted on 13 July of the same year, one of the last acts of Congress under the Articles of Confederation, and Emerson suggests there was a *quid pro quo.*

The slaves themselves had no say in the matter, but acceptance of slavery benefited all others concerned, though only as far as they cared to look. Had the North and the South looked further, they might have come to different decisions. But high political compromise that neglected moral deliberation was the order of the day. One of the defects and a continuing blindness in the overvaluation of politics is that it does not see that politics mainly ministers to the problems of those who already have some considerable power and influence. Emerson thought the expressed ideals of the American Revolution, understood to include the slaves, should have overruled even the imperative of Union. Continuing the above passage, he suggests alternatives:

> Many ways could have been taken. If the southern section had made a separate alliance with England, or gone back into colonies, the slaves would have been emancipated with the West Indians, and then the colonies could have been annexed to us. The bribe, if they foresaw the prosperity we have seen, was one to dazzle common men, and I do not wonder that common men excuse and applaud it. But always so

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28. Emerson 1855, "Lecture on slavery," in *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, pp. 99-100.

> much crime brings so much ruin. A little crime a minor penalty; a great crime a great disaster.[29]

A central point, evoking themes from "Compensation," is the need for moral deliberation in political decisions. Ignoring great moral crimes, by and by, we will produce "great disaster."

The following quotation from Emerson's "Address on the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies" (1844) provides insight into the moral grounds for his opposition to slavery. The passage starts with a general description of the evils:

> Language must be raked, the secrets of slaughterhouses and infamous holes that cannot front the day, must be ransacked, to tell what Negro-slavery has been. These men, our benefactors, as they are producers of corn and wine, of coffee, of tobacco, of cotton, of sugar, of rum, and brandy, gentle and joyous themselves, and producers of comfort and luxury for the civilized world,—there seated in the finest climates of the globe, children of the sun,—I am heart-sick when I read how they came there, and how they are kept there. Their case was left out of the mind and out of the heart of their brothers.

Certainly, their case was left out at the Constitutional Convention, as Emerson was later to argue. But they were entitled to more. Emerson continues:

> The prizes of society, the trumpet of fame, the privileges of learning, of culture, of religion, the decencies and joys of marriage, honor, obedience, personal authority, and a perpetual melioration into a finer civility, these were for all, but not for them.[30]

By seeing Emerson as essentially a religious thinker, deeply concerned with the human soul, and the development of human potentialities, we will see that he thought slavery wrong, fundamentally wrong, because it denied to some human beings what belong by right to all. There are distinctively human potentialities, and Emerson leaves no doubt that they are independent of race. He was not the first, but his expression of the point was of great value in overturning the negligent and myopic common-sense of his day. Creative growth of the person is not something we can reserve for some people at the expense of others. According to Emerson, there is a moral law of the mind, and of the world, which forbids denial of free development to anyone, and the moral law determines the fate of the transgressor.

Similarly, regarding our America today, we might say that all its power and might, military, economic, and cultural, will not and cannot prevent the unto-

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29. *Ibid*., p. 100.
30. Emerson 1844, "Address on the Emancipation," in *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, p. 9.

ward and unhappy workings of our own growing social and economic inequalities. The threat implicit in this places limits on what we may do. We may of course evade the point for a time, but the workings of growing inequalities are ultimately quite sure. The consequences or effects of what we now do are already included in our present acts, which are indeed causes. There can be little doubt of what we typically neglect, if, too intensively, we pursue our own special talent and power of economic expansion. In consequence, then, there is, plausibly, even less room for doubt on the proper direction of our deeper and fuller success.

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