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### Emerson, Virtue, and Evil: Thoughts for a Rescue Operation

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# EMERSON, VIRTUE AND EVIL: THOUGHTS FOR A RESCUE OPERATION

*Dr. Lois Eveleth*

Every scripture is to be interpreted by the same spirit  
which gave it forth.        Emerson, "Nature"

Mystical classics have neither birthday nor native land.  
William James, Varieties of Religious Experience

The great theme of self-reliance pervading the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson resonates well with an American spirit of independence and individualism. Critic Brooks Atkinson was representative of this mainstream view of Emerson when he wrote that Emerson "...was the first philosopher of the American Spirit."<sup>1</sup> More recently, though, others such as Robert Bellah have discovered that, while Americans may have perfected a rhetoric of independence, they have need also of developing a rhetoric of community. We can see the difference between these two rhetorical forms if we place self-reliance within a context of ethical theories. Placed there, self-reliance seems to approach ethical egoism. If this is so, self-reliance may suffer the weakness of egoism, viz. impotence in conflict resolution and in developing a sense of community. There are even more substantial criticisms of Emerson. The gentle damning of him by Yves Simon comes to mind, when this Aristotelian classified the Sage of Concord with writers who "...instead of theories of virtue have developed theories of natural spontaneity." (emphasis his). Or Newton Arvin, in a literary idiom: Emerson is unwilling to give "...a steady confrontation of Tragedy, or a sustained and unswerving gaze at the face of Evil."<sup>2</sup> Any such charges that Emerson understood neither evil nor virtue deserve attention, for they are serious criticisms against one who consistently wrote in moralistic terms.

It is fairer to Emerson to read him on his own terms and give him the most sympathetic reading possible. His lengthy passages on moral questions are part of the tradition of Idealism, and his presuppositions and very questions have ancient roots in the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus. Emerson read the Enneads and acknowledged their attractiveness. His Harvard education, which introduced him to the Neo-Platonism of the Cambridge Platonists, has also been cited as an influence.<sup>3</sup> In the interest of fairness, we should read Emerson with this connection in mind. What follows is a selection of textual evidence and interpretation intended to provide a context that allows a sympathetic reading of the essays. By thus shifting the context one sees, I believe, that Emerson's ethical stance is certainly more complex, and maybe more enlightened, than some would suppose.

An idealist, Emerson claimed priority of Spirit, or OverSoul, over the physical. The OverSoul continually manifests itself as Nature within its cosmic ecstasy, i.e., an eternal process remarkably like Neo-Platonic emanation. He even uses this special term.

Every natural fact is an emanation and that from which it emanates is an emanation also, and from every emanation is a new emanation. If anything could stand still, it would be crushed and dissipated by the torrent it resisted...The beauty of these fair objects is imported into them from a metaphysical and eternal spring.<sup>4</sup>

This is substantial activity underlying whatever discrete forms emerge. A benefit of so doing is that, if one stresses the priority of process over structure, one is able to give, as Emerson does, an explanation to diversity. While flux is fundamental, there is still order. Unity is postulated; it does not require an explanation, since all is OverSoul. In Plotinus's words: "The universe, moved eternally by an intelligent Soul, becomes blessed and alive...never has this cosmos been without a soul...it has a soul that does not belong to it yet is present to it."<sup>5</sup> Negatively expressed, this unity is not a homogeneity, the components being indistinguishable from each other, but an ordering within which diversity is achieved. Because of this order, the flux cannot run to chaos.

Relation or relatedness is the one and only ordering principle in his system: to be is to be in relation. This claim effectively establishes Nature as an organic-type system whose constituent elements and processes are mutually defining and interdependent. As far as man is concerned, his characteristics are those of Nature. If Nature is OverSoul-made-manifest, man also is dualistic. He is one with the OverSoul; he is “part and parcel of the whole.” His spirit is “...the same divinity transmuted” and he knows the “intimate divinity.” (W.I.221; W.I.268) Compare this to Plotinus. “The Ideas are not spatially estranged from us. Wherever there is a soul that has risen from its body, the Ideas are there. The realm of sense is localized; the intelligible realm is not.”<sup>6</sup> The divinity is “...present to all beings though they may not know it.” Man, for Emerson, is “...a stream whose source is hidden.” Spirit, consciousness, or moral sentiment: these are just three of the words scattered through the essays, which refer to persons. These terms have an identical referent. They are various ways of referring to the “primitive force” in man, an energy, a dynamism which “lurks within all,” a force impelling one both to know Nature and to act within it.

Man is distinctive, though, within Nature, in that his is a multi-leveled consciousness, which defines his function within, and responsibility to Nature. Such ‘levels’ are a metaphorical rendering of the creative human process of growth in insight. The metaphor, whose roots extend back to Plato’s Divided Line, is less a claim that there are levels than that a process is eternally the case. Plotinus uses vision imagery. “The Fatherland for us is there whence we have come...what is the course?...We must close our eyes and invoke a new manner of seeing.”<sup>7</sup> Such a new manner of seeing is based on Plotinus’s extraordinary answer to what will later be called the mind-body problem. He writes: “The soul is not body and it contains rather than is contained. It is no more in the body than it is in a vase.”<sup>8</sup>

Emerson describes three levels or stages of such vision, i.e. intuition, reason, and imagination. Intuition is an inchoate, pre-conceptual, pre-reflexive capacity, according to which man is at home in Nature. At the second level a knowing subject distinguishes himself from what is not himself, defining that phenomenon, now uniquely limited or defined by his intentionality, as ‘object’. The process is a separating and is the human definition of ‘fact’. It creates diversity. The third phase, the most valuable, is the work

of imagination. Imagination re-aligns all relations, a re-alignment made necessary by the introduction of each new object. It is the capacity to synthesize and then to give expression both to the new object and to the realigned web of relationships rendered necessary by the incorporation of new fact. Only human consciousness is accomplishing this work, and therein we see the special role of man. The unique function of mankind is to know Nature and to give expression to this knowledge. Man's work is "this conversion of all nature into the rhetoric of thought." (W.II.337) Nature is not an assemblage of structures:

There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees. Our globe seen by God is a transparent law, not a mass of facts. The law dissolves the fact and holds it fluid. (W.II.302)

Accordingly, human knowledge is not information about structures but understanding of relations. These relationships are such that they are not independent of the human knower. Instead, the relationships ascertained within Nature are a function of human consciousness, which is, by definition, itself a relational capacity. Emerson makes on this point a startling claim: the emanation of forms and the growth of consciousness are correlative, maybe identifiable. There is a sense in which man 'creates' Nature, if only in the sense that Nature has no meaning without man's conscious attention. Because man is a web of relations, Nature is a web of relations. Man is within Nature as Nature's self-knowledge; man is "nature's finer success in self-explication." (W.II.352) "Where he is, there is Nature." (W.II.60) Man is Nature-knowing-itself.

This knowledge is a continuing process, circles being Emerson's image for the process.

The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end. The extent to which this generation of circles, wheel without wheel, will go depends on the force or truth of the individual soul.  
(W.II.303-4)

Truth is defined appropriately as the growth of consciousness. The seeker of truth cannot repose and still have a claim on truth. (W.II.341) The criterion for the recognition of truth is its invitation to further inquiry. Why this criterion must be such is seen in the requirement of synthesis: each new insight must be incorporated, and the act of incorporation generates further inquiry. The process is virtually infinite. In no way, then, can stagnation or satisfaction gain respectability. "...the moment we cease to report and attempt to correct and contrive, it is not truth." (W.II.329)

The process or growth that ontologically is movement toward ever-greater unity, is, epistemologically, movement toward ever-greater insight. In the language of Plotinus this process is the 'return'. Human action, though, is also part of the process: action completes knowledge. "That man shall be learned who reduceth his learning to practice...the only way into nature is to enact our best insight." (W.II.22) "The power to see is not separated from the will to do." (W.II.281)

Human consciousness is always a moral sentiment. Emerson's most suggestive description of the moral sentiment is that it is "the law of laws." (W.II.123) Functionally, this dynamism is the unanalyzable source of the relational capacity of man in Nature; morally, it is the ordering or grading (law) of all human relations (laws). There can be no doubt that the possibilities open to one's actions are virtually infinite, at least in the sense that limits are too changeable to be tabulated. From this array one chooses, and, for one's choices, Emerson offered a means of grading or evaluation. This law of laws is without content: there is no specific content, no specific action either praised or condemned. If there were content, this guiding principle could not be universal. It is required, though, to be universal, sufficiently unspecified to apply in every instance. Still, its applicability to human action and its evaluative function demand that this universal principle be also regulative.

The unity of things is the law of laws. What everyone is willing to have universalized is unity. Just as greater clarity of knowledge follows upon an increasing relatedness, so too the goodness of unity or harmony attends relatedness. Consider the Enneads, where the highest hypostasis, The One, is itself Unity. "Here is unity superior to any your thought lays hold of, unity that exists by itself and in itself and is without attributes."<sup>9</sup> It is known in no ordinary way: "...awareness of The One comes to us

neither by knowing nor by the pure thought that discovers the other intelligible things, but by a presence transcending knowledge." (emphasis mine)<sup>10</sup> This process or discovery or return is also a purification, or, virtue. "Union with its kin is its good; with the foreign, it is evil...Virtue is what results in the soul from conversion."<sup>11</sup>

Emerson, placing the universal principle within man, disallowed anything external from that position of universality; nothing external to man – no great social plans, political vision, or economic programs – can be a goal for which man would have to be construed as means. Morality is a human affair which, even while advocating an individualism, an attitude associated with disunity, neither deteriorates to a disunity nor suggests a social fragmentation.

Assessments of actions and decision-making among available choices are to be achieved in terms of the universal principle. Moral judging is comparative in character: action A is good to the extent that it approximates harmony; action A is preferable to action B to the extent that it achieves a closer approximation to the ideal. In both cases, i.e., comparing A with the ideal, and comparing A, B, and the ideal, the innate moral sentiment, that "reserved force, which acts directly by presence and without means" (W.II.89-90), seeking harmony, "makes by its presence or absence right and wrong, beauty and ugliness, genius or depravation." (W.II.289)

Because the moral sentiment is a drive to seek harmony, whatever is termed 'evil' is less harmonious than an alternative. Evil is an absence of goodness, goodness which we wish were there, or goodness which we hope someday to put there. Evil is analogous to ugliness, as goodness is to beauty. Ugliness is an absence of beauty, beauty which we wish were there, or beauty which we will someday allow to emerge or will create for ourselves. Humans are the only beings in Nature who see goodness, who see beauty, who are besotted with these, who are disappointed when these are absent, and who bend every effort to create them. If action A approximates the ideal more than action B does, B is, to that extent, evil. "The only sin is limitation." (W.II.308) "Nothing is so weak as an egotist.: (W.I.391)

Evil is a form of separation. The disease begins in the will, a disease of rebellion and separation, but the intellect is soon infected, so that the man ceases to see God whole in each object.... (W.II.105)

Far from preaching an overweening individualism, Emerson is advocating an ideal of unity, which can be labeled individualistic only in origin and responsibility. Choosing the less harmonious is choosing evil. Nothing can be labeled, in itself, either good or evil: action B is evil only in comparison to action A; A is not good in itself, nor can it ever be. If anything were construed as good in itself, it would be raised to the status of a goal, thus reducing man and human action to the status of means for its achievement. The appropriate human sentiment or instinct is to refuse the dominion of facts (W.II.33). Such a person, seeing the principle, sees that “the facts fall aptly and supple into their places; they know their master, and the meanest of them glorifies him.” (W.II.33) The “fountain of all good”, and so, of evil, is within man, and nowhere outside him.” (W.I.125) The disharmony of limitation or separation can describe all forms of evil. “Whilst thus the world will be whole and refuses to be disparted, we seek to act partially, to sunder, to appropriate...” (W.II.103). “The weakness of the will begins when the individual would be something of himself.” (W.II.271)

Plotinus writes that “ugliness and evil are basically one.”<sup>12</sup> “Evil is of this lower realm, brought into being by need, privation, defect...”<sup>13</sup> “...when the soul begins to hate its shame and puts away evil and makes its return, it finds it peace.”<sup>14</sup>

For Emerson, who sees harmony as a function of relatedness, the choice of the partial or separate can only mean the choice of that which is less related to other phenomena within Nature; in turn, the choice of the relatively unrelated is, to that degree, a failure to achieve an ever-possible harmony. Such a choice may be termed ‘evil.’

Just as this cosmic process of all things to unity is a latter-day rendering of the Neo-Platonic return of the Enneads, Emerson’s concept of evil is best read as a rendering of the Plotinian notion of evil. One passage reads:

We are not separated from The One, not distant from it...It is because of The One that we breathe and have our being...As we turn towards The One, we exist to a higher degree, while to withdraw from it is to fall. Our soul is delivered from evil by rising to that place which is free of all evils...there it truly lives.<sup>15</sup>

And elsewhere:



It is not the soul's nature to attain to utter nothingness. Falling into evil it falls, in this sense, into nothingness, but still not complete nothingness. And when it reverses direction, it arrives not at something different but at itself.<sup>16</sup>

Evil is the relative nothingness of all things. For Plotinus, even the highest hypostases just below The One are evil in part, since they lack the fullness of The One. Each being looks Janus-like in two directions, viz. at those things below it, less than itself and relatively evil, but upward also, at what it may still become. This twofold insight is itself an impetus to the return. Logically the status of the return in this schema is one of a completion or fulfillment of emanation. Systematically, an emanation/return duality is appropriate, because everything about Nature is dualistic. Emanation functions as an explanation of diversity, of the continuing possibility of the emergence of new form; the requirement of a completion to this diversification is a requirement of unity for whatever possibilities may or can emerge as real in Nature.

How, though, can one measure success, if this goal or ideal be elusive? Emerson's answer was aesthetic in formulation: there is a correlation between Nature and man, such that moral success is measured by beauty. This echoes Plotinus:

Goodness and Beauty are also one...  
How can one see the beauty of a good soul? Withdraw into yourself and look.  
If you do not as yet see beauty within you, do as does the sculptor of a statue that is to be beautified: he cuts away here, he smoothes it there...<sup>17</sup>

Beauty is less in Nature than it is a sign of man's harmony, according to Emerson. The problem of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty is solved by the redemption of the soul...The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is because man is disunited in himself." (W.I.73) Everything answers to the moral power in man, this moral power being a function of the harmonization, which he has achieved. To the extent that a person has approached this ideal, to that extent he enjoys moral

power or (the more usual term) virtue. One measures his success by looking to, by considering Nature. Beauty in Nature is the mark of virtue in man.

The hero is a paradigm of the self-trust advisable for everyone, of pride and optimism in one's energy and self-initiating power. This dynamism of every person, ontologically identified with the OverSoul, is a drive to enter into relations, because thus the energy manifests itself. Yet, every person enters into a repertoire of such constitutive relations, which is, forever, unique to him, the possibilities of such unique 'sets' of relations being virtually infinite. To do the opposite, i.e. to deny self-trust, is to trust in others, in society, the past, or in institutions. This, for Emerson, is vice, because it denies the source of one's creativity; denying creativity, it effectively denies the source of one's personal harmony; denying this, it prevents individualization. Individualization thus becomes an achievement of moral success; one's identity, a function of one's relations, is a duty which each person should take up.

Basic self-reliance achieves a unique set of relations, an achievement of individualization. 'Character', then, has both an ontological and moral connotation: what individuates a man is his character: one achieves ethical and ontological character conjointly. "Character is higher than intellect...Living is the functionary..." (W.I.99). It is in the realm of human action that one sees, with Emerson, a coherence of ontological and moral considerations. Personal excellence or virtue of character is the great task of self-creation.

Not everyone takes his task seriously, and some do not recognize their responsibility at all. Some seem content to guide their lives by the opinions of others or by events and things. Some choose the merely partial. Such person possesses less character or virtue than their opposites. Human cooperation is an ideal but not a necessary condition of ultimate harmony. If Emerson had made human cooperation a necessary condition, harmony could not be universal and inevitable. In his organic model, the integrity of the whole system takes precedence over individual integrity. "Justice," he says, "is not postponed." (W.II.102) There will be harmony in Nature, one that includes human actions and choice integrally. Yet, if not with the full cooperation of human choice, then, inevitably, with some involvement of humanity and retribution and compensation. The coherence of this inexorable system makes retribution and

accommodation necessary. Just as, ontologically, flux cannot run to chaos, in ethical terms, human choice cannot frustrate the OverSoul.

Ontologically, unity is possible only if, and to the degree that, diversity is the case. Man by his creativity and his choice introduces greater diversity into Nature, thereby raising the bar for unity. Just as diversity is a necessary condition of unity, evil is a necessary condition of good. For the appreciation and understanding of unity, diversity must be the case. Similarly, for the appreciation and understanding of good, evil must be the case. Evil, which is an absence of good, has a private status. Man is the only being who perceives evil, or, the absence of good, thereby raising the bar for the good. Central is the human intuition of unity and good. Had Emerson remained fully wed to Puritan theology, he would probably have explained such intuition with the doctrine of God's irresistible grace to the elect. This theological terminology is absent in the essays, yet such intuition mirrors the lack of freedom of the elect whom, given grace, must do good works. Their good works cannot bring about their salvation, for the elect are not free but rather are acting under the compulsion of grace. The good works, which they do, are, not the cause of their salvation, but a symptom of their call. Rejecting Christianity or Puritanism, Emerson no longer divided up humanity into two groups, the elect and the reprobate. Still, there are similarities between the rejected Puritanism and the worldview of the essays, similarities hard to forget when reading the essays. While the elect and reprobate may not be here, their 'ghosts' are present as two poles within which human transcendence proceeds.

Some conclusions are in order. There is textual evidence that Emerson applied and adapted the emanation-return scheme but did so creatively. Certainly there are differences. The hierarchy of hypostases or forms is gone, and we have instead Nature as an organic, dynamic manifestation of Spirit continually embodying itself. Virtue in Plotinus is ontological and intellectual; in Emerson, virtue is also moral and aesthetic. Comparing the two men, however, is not the goal. It is a crucial means of establishing that Emerson's ideas of virtue and evil are a creative adaptation of an earlier, complex world-view. As such the essays should be read. Transcendentalism cannot be read apart from its third-century ancestor. His mysticism is usually not mentioned, and we should look for its effects on the language, form and content of the essays. One translator-

editor's description of the method of Plotinus may be applied to Emerson: The ontology of Plotinus reposes upon the psychology of introspection.<sup>18</sup> His worldview is indeed complex. It is an American Idealism. In addition to its ancient connection, it carries some echoes from Berkeley and Kant. If one is forgetful of Emerson's philosophical commitment, he runs a risk of missing what the essays are doing. Keeping Plotinus specifically in mind is a virtual necessity. Within Nature and/or OverSoul, man enjoys a distinctive place. His distinction is established by his morally creative consciousness. The great theme of self-reliance is not an unenlightened, optimistic exercise in spontaneity but an ethical principle based on an ontology and corrected by the mandate of unity or harmony. One's virtue is the creation of his character, a word also used in both ontological and ethical senses. This dual use is suitable here, since these two realms are coextensive in Nature as a whole. Nothing in Nature is without some degree of identity and as a whole.

Emerson's challenge to achieve unity is key to preventing an exaggerated individualism. It is the feature of the Essays that we should revisit. Here we have indeed a complex work-view, for it requires us to think of metaphysics, epistemology and ethics conjointly, rather than disjunctively or of each separately. It asks us to share an intuitively based vision and to do without tightly argued premises and conclusions. But, I believe it is an enlightened view. It is an urging to unity, to a moral vision that Americans in particular need. What difference does it make? It says that unity is the primary goal – not power, money, technological progress, and not even information. It says that humans are the agents. If we do not accomplish this, it will not get done. We are acting on our own. We ought to do it. We are free to do it. And we are free not to do it. Progress is not inevitable. Regression is possible.

And we should learn, someday, how to tell the difference.

#### **ENDNOTES**

1. Brooks, Atkinson, "Introduction," Selected Writings of Emerson. New York: Modern Library, 1950. P. xi.
2. Yves R. Simon. The Definition of Moral Virtue. Edited by Vukan Kuic. New York: Fordham University Press, 1986. P.2; Newton Arvin, "House of Pain: Emerson and the Tragic Sense," in Stephen E. Whicher, Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953. Pp. 46-59

3. Elizabeth Flower and Murray G. Murphy. A History of Philosophy in America. Vol. I. New York: Capricorn Books, 1997. Pp. 312-313.
4. Emerson's complete Writings. Ed. By Edward Waldo Emerson, 12 vols. New York: Wm. H. Wise, 1929. This is the Centenary Edition, first published by his son in 1903. Hereafter, references made in the text will be designated 'W' and will give the volume and page number. For example, this passage is W.I. 199-200: pages 199 to 200 in volume one of this 1929 edition.
5. The Essential Plotinus, Representative Treatises from the Enneads. Selected and Newly Translated with Introduction and Commentary by Elmer O'Brien, S.J. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing company, 1964. The usual designation will be used: ennead, treatise, section. This section is V,1,2: the second section of the first treatise within the fifth Ennead.
6. V,9,13; VI,9,7.
7. I,6,9
8. IV,3,20
9. VI,9,6
10. VI,9,4
11. I,2,4
12. VI,9,9
13. V,9,10
14. I,6,6
15. VI,9,9
16. VI,9,11
17. I,6,6; I,6,8
18. Elmer O'Brien, Pp.26-28