



Individualism in Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance"

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Framing Question

In his essay "Self-Reliance," how does Ralph Waldo Emerson define individualism, and how, in his view, can it affect society?

Understanding

In "Self-Reliance" Emerson defines individualism as a profound and unshakeable trust in one's own intuitions. Embracing this view of individualism, he asserts, can revolutionize society, not through a sweeping mass movement, but through the transformation of one life at a time and through the creation of leaders capable of greatness.

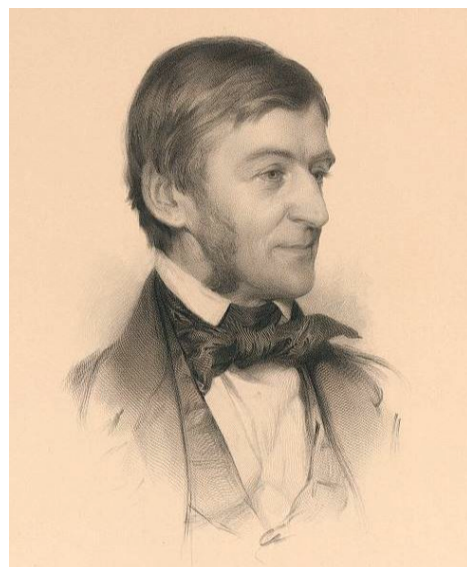
Text

[Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance", 1841.](#)

Background

Ralph Waldo Emerson died in 1882, but he is still very much with us. When you hear people assert their individualism, perhaps in rejecting help from the government or anyone else, you hear the voice of Emerson. When you hear a self-help guru on TV tell people that if they change their way of thinking, they will change reality, you hear the voice of Emerson. He is America's apostle of individualism, our champion of mind over matter, and he set forth the core of his thinking in his essay "Self-Reliance" (1841).

While they influence us today, Emerson's ideas grew out of a specific time and place, which spawned a philosophical movement called Transcendentalism. "Self-Reliance" asserts a central belief in that philosophy: truth lies in our spontaneous, involuntary intuitions. We do not have the space here to explain Transcendentalism fully, but we can sketch some out its fundamental convictions, a bit of its historical context, and the way "Self-Reliance" relates to it.



Portrait of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1878

By the 1830s many in New England, especially the young, felt that the religion they had inherited from their Puritan ancestors had become cold and impersonal. In their view it lacked emotion and failed to foster that sense of connectedness to the divine which they sought in religion. To them it seemed that the church had taken its eyes off heaven and fixed them on the material world, which under the probings, measurements, and observations of science seemed less and less to offer assurance of divine presence in the world.

Taking direction from ancient Greek philosophy and European thinking, a small group of New

England intellectuals embraced the idea that men and women did not need churches to connect with divinity and that nature, far from being without spiritual meaning, was, in fact, a realm of symbols that pointed to divine truths. According to these preachers and writers, we could connect with divinity and understand those symbols — that is to say, *transcend* or rise above the material world — simply by accepting our own intuitions about God, nature, and experience. These insights, they argued, needed no external verification; the mere fact that they flashed across the mind proved they were true.

To hold these beliefs required enormous self-confidence, of course, and this is where Emerson and “Self-Reliance” come into the picture. He contends that there is within each of us an “aboriginal Self,” a first or ground-floor self beyond which there is no other. In “Self-Reliance” he defines it in mystical terms as the “deep force” through which we “share the life by which things exist.” It is “the fountain of action and thought,” the source of our spontaneous intuitions. This self defines not a particular, individual identity but a universal, human identity. When our insights derive from it, they are valid not only for us but for all humankind. Thus we can be assured that what is true in our private hearts is, as Emerson asserts, “true for all men.”

But how can we tell if our intuitions come from the “aboriginal Self” and are, therefore, true? We cannot. Emerson says we must have the self-trust to believe that they do and follow them as if they do. If, indeed, they are true, eventually everyone will accept them, and they will be “rendered back to us” as “the universal sense.”

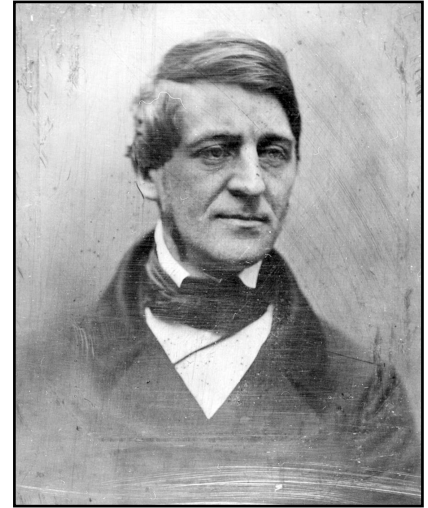
Until the rest of the world accepts our beliefs, however, we will be out of step; we will be nonconformists. Emerson tells us not to worry. The essence of self-reliance is resistance to conformity. Indeed, nonconformity is a sign of strength: “Whoso would be a man,” he writes, “must be a nonconformist.” In a sense “Self-Reliance” can be seen as a pep talk designed to strengthen our resolve to stand up to society’s efforts to make us conform. “Nothing,” Emerson thunders, “is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.” This is individualism in the extreme.

While “Self-Reliance” deals extensively with theological matters, we cannot overlook its political significance. It appeared in 1841, just four years after President Andrew Jackson left office. In the election of 1828 Jackson forged an alliance among the woodsmen and farmers of the western frontier and the laborers of eastern cities. Emerson opposed the Jacksonians over specific policies, chiefly their defense of slavery and their support for the expulsion of Indians from their territories. But he objected to them on broader grounds as well. Many people like Emerson, who despite his nonconformist thought still held many of the political views of the old New England elite from which he sprang, feared that the rise of the Jacksonian electorate would turn American democracy into mob rule. In fact, at one point in “Self-

Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of text are we dealing with?
2. For what audience was it intended?
3. For what purpose was it written?
4. When was it written?
5. What was going on at the time of its writing that might have influenced its composition?

Reliance” he proclaims “now we are a mob.” When you see the word “mob” here, do not picture a large, threatening crowd. Instead, think of what we today would call mass society, a society whose culture and politics are shaped not by the tastes and opinions of a small, narrow elite but rather by those of a broad, diverse population. Emerson opposed mass-party politics because it was based on nothing more than numbers and majority rule, and he was hostile to mass culture because it was based on manufactured entertainments. Both, he believed, distracted people from the real questions of spiritual health and social justice. Like some critics today, he believed that mass society breeds intellectual mediocrity and conformity. He argued that it produces soft, weak men and women, more prone to whine and whimper than to embrace great challenges. Emerson took as his mission the task of lifting people out of the mass and turning them into robust, sturdy individuals who could face life with confidence. While he held out the possibility of such transcendence to all Americans, he knew that not all would respond. He assured those who did that they would achieve greatness and become “guides, redeemers, and benefactors” whose personal transformations and leadership would rescue democracy. Thus if “Self-Reliance” is a pep talk in support for nonconformists, it is also a manual on how to live for those who seek to be individuals in a mass society.



Describing “Self-Reliance” as a pep talk and a manual re-enforces the way most people have read the essay, as a work of affirmation and uplift, and there is much that is affirmative and uplifting in it. Yet a careful reading also reveals a darker side to Emerson’s self-reliance. His uncompromising embrace of nonconformity and intellectual integrity can breed a chilly arrogance, a lack of compassion, and a lonely isolation. That is why one critic has called Emerson’s work “deeply unconsoling.”¹ In this lesson we explore this side of Emerson along with his bracing optimism.

A word about our presentation. Because readers can take “Self-Reliance” as an advice manual for living and because Emerson was above all a teacher, we found it engaging to cast him not as Ralph Waldo Emerson, a nineteenth-century philosopher, but as Dr. Ralph, a twenty-first-century self-help guru. In the end we ask if you would embrace his approach to life and sign up for his tweets.

1. Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001) p. 18.

Text Analysis

Paragraph 1

[1] I read the other day some verses written by an eminent painter which were original and not conventional. [2] The soul always hears an admonition in such lines, let the subject be what it may. [3] The sentiment they instil is of more value than any thought they may contain. [4] To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, — that is genius. [5] Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost, — and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment. [6] Familiar as the voice of the mind is to each, the highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato, and Milton is, that they set at naught books and traditions, and spoke not what men but what they thought. [7] A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind

Activity: Vocabulary

Learn definitions by exploring how words are used in context.



from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. [8] Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. [9] Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. [10] They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most [especially] when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. [11] Else [otherwise], to-morrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another.

What is important about the verses written by the painter in sentence 1?

From evidence in this paragraph, what do you think Emerson means by “original”?

In sentences 2 and 3 how does Emerson suggest we should read an “original” work?

In telling us how to read an original work, what do you think Emerson is telling us about reading his work?

How does Emerson define genius?

Considering this definition of genius, what does Emerson mean when he says that “the inmost in due time becomes the outmost”?

Why, according to Emerson, do we value Moses, Plato, and Milton?

Thus far Emerson has said that we should seek truth by looking into our own hearts and that we, like such great thinkers as Moses, Plato, and Milton, should ignore what we find in books and in the learning of the past. What implications does his advice hold for education?

Why then should we bother to study “great works of art” or even “Self-Reliance” for that matter?

Based on your reading of paragraph 1, how does Emerson define individualism? Support your answer with reference to specific sentences.

Paragraph 34 (excerpt)

[1] The sinew and heart of man seem to be drawn out, and we are become timorous, desponding whimperers. [2] We are afraid of truth, afraid of fortune, afraid of death, and afraid of each other. [3] Our age yields no great and perfect persons. [4] We want men and women who shall renovate life and our social state, but we see that most natures are insolvent, cannot satisfy their own wants [needs], have an ambition out of all proportion to their practical force [aim at goals they cannot achieve], and do lean and beg day and night continually.... [5] We are parlour soldiers. [6] We shun the rugged battle of fate, where strength is born.

Activity: Dr. Ralph's Tweets
Decipher Emerson's aphorisms.



What, according to Emerson, is wrong with the “social state” of America in 1841?

Given the political context in which he wrote “Self-Reliance,” why might Emerson think that American society was no longer capable of producing “great and perfect persons”?

What is Emerson’s solution for America’s problem, and how does that solution illuminate what he is trying to do in “Self-Reliance”?

Paragraph 35 (excerpt)

[1] If our young men miscarry in their first enterprises, they lose all heart. If the young merchant fails, men say he is ruined. [2] If the finest genius studies at one of our colleges, and is not installed in an office within one year afterwards in the cities or suburbs of Boston or New York, it seems to his friends and to himself that he is right in being disheartened, and in complaining the rest of his life. [3] A sturdy lad from New Hampshire or Vermont, who in turn tries all the professions, who teams it, farms it, peddles, keeps a school, preaches, edits a newspaper, goes to Congress, buys a township,* and so forth, in successive years, and always, like a cat, falls on his feet, is worth a hundred of these city dolls. [4] He walks abreast with his days, and feels no shame in not ‘studying a profession,’ for he does not postpone his life, but lives already. He has not one chance, but a hundred chances.

** Emerson does not mean that the “sturdy lad” would buy a town. He probably means that he would buy a large piece of uninhabited land (townships in New England were six miles square). The point here is that he would become a substantial landowner.*

What does Emerson mean by “miscarry”? What context clues help us discover that meaning?

What is the relationship between the young men who miscarry and the young merchants who fail in paragraph 35 and the “timorous, desponding whimperers” of paragraph 34?

According to Emerson, how does an “un-self-reliant” person respond to failure?

Emerson structures this paragraph as a comparison between a “city doll” and a “sturdy lad.”
With reference to paragraph 34 what does the “sturdy lad” represent?

What are the connotations of “city doll”?

Compare a “city doll” with a “sturdy lad.”

What point does Emerson make with this comparison?

What do you notice about the progression of the jobs Emerson assigns to his “sturdy lad”?

We have seen that Emerson hopes to raise above the mob people who will themselves be “great and perfect persons” and restore America’s ability to produce such people. What does the progression of jobs he assigns to the “sturdy lad” suggest about the roles these people will play in American society?

Paragraph 36

[1] It is easy to see that a greater self-reliance must work a revolution in all the offices and relations of men; in their religion; in their education; in their pursuits; their modes of living; their association; in their property; in their speculative views.

Activity: Living the Self-Reliant Life

Explore Emerson’s advice on how to live the self-reliant life.



Why does Emerson think that “a greater self-reliance must work a revolution in all the offices and relations of men”?

Glossary

admonition: gentle, friendly criticism

latent: hidden

naught: ignored

lustre: brightness

firmament: sky

bards: poets

sages: wise men and women

alienated: made unfamiliar by being separated from us

else: otherwise

sinew: connective tissues

timorous: shy

insolvent: empty

Portrait of Ralph Waldo Emerson engraved and published by Stephen A. Schoff, Newtonville, Massachusetts, 1878, from an original drawing by Samuel W. Rowse [ca. 1858] in the possession of Charles Eliot Norton. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-DIG-pga-04133.

Daguerreotype of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 4 x 5 black-and-white negative, creator unknown. Courtesy of the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.