

13 STUDIES IN EMERSON

13.1 Emerson's World View

¹In epistemological respect, Emerson (1803–1882) is a subjectivist. All who like Emerson study Berkeley, Hume, Fichte, Schelling, and Hindu illusionist philosophy (advaita) become subjectivists. And anyone who without guidance takes part in the mountaineering experiments of those philosophers will tumble down without fail, just like they do, into logical abysses yawning everywhere. It was thus inevitable that Emerson would get stuck in the cobweb of the airiest abstractions wrought by those logic-spinners. Pursuing this sort of study one eventually arrives at the standpoint of denying the common sense given by nature, the law of thought (this is this), and the objective and absolute existence of material reality.

²Starting from the seemingly ineradicable logical error that “matter is not what it appears to be” one ends up by trying to explain it away altogether. However, matter is always what it appears to be, but besides and in addition to that always a totally different kind of matter, which science with its resources will never realize to be matter still.

³It was the advaita of the Hindus that finally defeated even Schopenhauer logically, his realism and objectivity in other respects notwithstanding. He never succeeded in silencing the voice of his logical conscience, however, which is clear from a confidential disclosure to a friend: “Anyone who denies the existence of matter should be committed to the madhouse.” Such disclosures show that there may be a difference between what the philosopher deems himself compelled to preach and what he thinks in his heart of hearts but is unable to explain.

⁴Emerson never became an expert on epistemology. He was contented to adhere to the view prevalent in his times that the ultimate basis of existence was “Will and Idea”. This epistemological subjectivism of his is the more remarkable as his understanding of Pythagoras, Platon, and Bacon widely surpasses that of other philosophers.

⁵This said, his theoretical belief can be left aside, the more so as the logical somersaults of the philosophers, which he never saw through, had no influence on his common sense at large.

⁶Emerson was misunderstood, of course, in the way Pythagoras, Platon, and Bacon are misunderstood. The “metaphysical” imaginative constructions of philosophers are not meant here. They cannot be misunderstood, since they are absurd. Epistemologists must finally learn that they cannot make statements on the unexplored, that they do not know the facts of reality, that consequently they are unable to pose the problems right.

⁷They have tried to make Emerson a “neo-Platonic” and “sufi” pantheist and mystic. The use of such phrases makes impression on ignorance but also reveals the unreliable commentator to those who know.

⁸Pantheism, correctly understood, says that every atom in the universe is by nature divine. This implies that in the cosmic process of manifestation it will some time actualize its potential consciousness, that this consciousness will subsequently develop in the ever higher natural kingdoms of ever higher material worlds until it has acquired omniscience of, and omnipotence in, the entire cosmos.

⁹Omniscient ignorance declares mysticism to be the demonstration of imaginative conceit, emotional twaddle, and muddled thought. But “mysticism” is what you are silent about just as “hermeticism”. When based on tenable epistemology, mysticism is that secret knowledge of existence which its votaries have received and pledged themselves not to divulge to the uninitiated who can only misunderstand and misuse and, with the habitual, scornful superciliousness of ignorance, discredit in all ways the one true knowledge of reality and of the meaning and goal of life.

¹⁰“Mystic” is also the name given to the emotional states experienced by the individual as he give himself up to the longing of emotional attraction for that unity of life which he surmises beyond all reason. It is mysticism at the stage of culture without the requisite concepts of reality. The mystic is unable to communicate the pertaining experiences to other people. At any event, this kind of language can be understood only by those who have had similar experiences.

¹¹It is clear that Emerson was not satisfied with the explanations given by the philosophers. He was not satisfied even with his own formulation. But he also asserted the right of everyone to do his best in this respect. He also encourages everyone to have faith in his view.

¹²It might be objected that this is a good thing when it comes to energy, endurance, and efficiency, and this in particular if you have succeeded in receiving the right knowledge. Unfortunately the individual is in need of very much before he has acquired the insight necessary to discrimination between warranted and unwarranted self-reliance in forming his opinion on the nature of existence and on the meaning and goal of existence. Most people’s faith in their own capacity in that respect borders on the grotesque.

13.2 Emerson’s Life View

¹Emerson’s life view is a union of mysticism (emotional attraction) and esoterics (Platonic ideas) the result of which was a self-formed religion. His profound historical education appears in the fact that he profited by the religious views of the Orient such as they are found in Islamic Sufism, Persian Mithraism, Indian Buddhism, and Chinese Confucianism. He expresses his admiration of the pertaining maxims. And he says outright “Europe has always owed to oriental genius, its divine impulses.”

²In his sermons, the emotional element preponderates, which often entails its intruding on the mental element, as occurs at the stage of culture where feeling becomes sovereign and absolutizes the relationships in life. To the mentalist, the pertaining exaggerations stand out as too manifest and so defeat their purpose by arousing criticism which would have been non-existent if the form of prose had been changed for that of poetry, in which feeling can be sovereign without harm.

³Emerson refused to see the demoniac feature of existence, although he was far from blind to the seamy side of life and human idiocy in most of its shapes. He clearly saw the complete injudiciousness of the masses. To him, the genius held a unique position in the process of mankind’s development.

⁴His exceptional freedom from prevalent illusions and fictions makes it clear that he possessed latent insight in his subconscious. The esoterician has entered the world of reality, hidden from those who live in the worlds of emotional illusions and mental fictions. Anyone who enters reality has to learn to eliminate all the traditional views in all respects.

⁵At the stages of barbarism and civilization, people live in the emotional spheres of repulsion and in the mental spheres of misleading fictions. In emotional respect hatred is their elixir of life. In practice this means that both what is “good” and what is “evil” in them are manifestations of egoism. If they derive advantage from love, they will love. If they benefit by hating their friends, they will hate them. They are all doomed to despise each other. This is the usual, trivial realization. To the esoterician, however, there is in this no moralism, no blame, no judgement, no talk of faults and failings. To the esoterician everyone is found on some one of the many hundreds of levels of development there are in the human kingdom. The individual is neither “good” nor “evil” but is on a certain level and knows no better. The entire moral way of looking at things is radically false, the fiction system of total life-ignorance. The moralist lives in appearances, in the hypocrisy of feigned decency by which all deceive themselves.

⁶The works of Emerson are among those books, unfortunately too few, which are worth reading. His style is aphoristic. He speaks his mind. The so-called proofs by which people believe themselves able to prove something but which are attempts at persuasion he regarded as belonging at the school stage. He wrote for spiritually adult people who could think for themselves and could understand his language.

⁷He makes great demands on his reader. All do so who use the expressions of the true poet in the spheres of life attraction. Subjectively living in superphysical reality he had no access to the objective facts that would have made it clear to others what he actually meant. With endless toil he constantly sought to give new expression to what he wanted to say. Perhaps in the future a kindred soul will reinterpret his work where he himself bitterly realized his failure.

⁸Just as few of Platon's readers are able to understand what he really meant to say, so the individual must have attained at least the stage of culture to appreciate Emerson right. Goethe's words, "you resemble the mind you understand," is one of the esoteric axioms. It was the answer that Goethe gave his critics and something that the doctors of literature should try to grasp.

⁹Emerson was not an esoterician in the sense that he succeeded in actualizing that knowledge of reality and life which he had gained in long-past incarnations. But he had that knowledge in consciousness layers of incarnation deposits within so easy reach that it, as unerring instinct, became the thread of Ariadne to guide him out of the hopeless labyrinth of human illusions and fictions.

¹⁰Even if he cannot be called a pioneer of the superphysical, since he lacked the objective consciousness requisite to the exploration of higher material worlds, yet to many seekers at the stage of culture he became a consoling asserter of the existence of the superphysical. He was also fully aware of the fact that the causes of physical events are in the superphysical, that we can never explain the effects without knowledge of their superphysical causes.

¹¹Everything superphysical Emerson summed up with the term, the "over-soul". He was a convinced "Platonist", and the over-soul in Emerson corresponds to the world of Platonic ideas, that which Patanjali of India calls the "rain-cloud of knowable things" or that which hylozoics indicates as the molecules of the causal world with their consciousness content.

¹²The idea of the over-soul is the fundament of Emerson's view of existence. It was to him the key to understanding the true meaning of the realities of physical life.

¹³The over-soul in Emerson is the sum total of those three realities which the esotericians call the causal world, the causal envelope of the individual, and the individual ultimate self (the monad) in the causal envelope. To call anyone who has brought these three concepts together into one a "pantheist" is easy enough. Unfortunately such clichés are too easily available and too easily impress the ignorant.

¹⁴Emerson cannot be designated by some hackneyed cliché, however. He could take over thoughts from the philosophers. But he gave them another character than they had in the systems from which he drew them. He called himself a "transcendentalist," meaning by "transcendentalism" a view that saw life as divine in nature, superphysical reality as having greater reality content than physical reality. He considered that the true causes of all physical events could be ultimately traced back to the world of ideas.

¹⁵Emerson summed up his basic ideas thus:

¹⁶"There is one soul. It is related to the world."

¹⁷"Art is its action thereon."

¹⁸"Science finds its methods."

¹⁹"Literature is its record."

²⁰"Religion is the emotion of reverence that it inspires."

²¹"Ethics is the soul illustrated in human life."

²²“Society is the finding of this soul by individuals in each other.”

²³“Trades are the learning the soul in nature by labor.”

²⁴“Politics is the activity of the soul illustrated in power.”

²⁵“Manners are silent and mediate expressions of the soul.”

²⁶Two more quotations to summarize Emerson’s thought: “What we commonly call man, – the eating, drinking, planting, counting man, – does not, as we know him, represent himself, but misrepresents himself. Him we do not respect; but the soul whose organ he is, would he let it appear through his action, would make our knees bend. When it breathes through his intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through his will, it is virtue; when it flows through his affection, it is love.”

²⁷“Thus revering the soul, and learning, as the ancient said, that ‘its beauty is immense,’ man will come to see that the world is the perennial miracle which the soul worketh, and be less astonished at its particular wonders; he will learn that there is no profane history; that all history is sacred; that the universe is represented in an atom, in a moment of time. He will weave no longer a spotted life of shreds and patches, but he will live with a divine unity.”

²⁸At the present stage of mankind’s development, such a philosopher is confused with a poet. As he did not have the esoteric facts in that incarnation, he could not formulate his view of life as exactly as was required. But to that reader who is also a knower his insight shines on every line of his poetical and symbolic writing.

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Endnotes by the Translator

13.2.1 “Europe has always owed to oriental genius, its divine impulses.” Emerson said this when addressing the senior class in Divinity College, Cambridge, on July 15, 1838.

13.2.16-25 These sayings of Emerson are quotations from his *Journal*.

13.2.26,27 These two quotations of Emerson are from his essay, *The Over-Soul*.