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The self as onwardness: reading Emerson's self-reliance and experience

El yo progresivo: leyendo la autosuficiencia y la experiencia de Emerson

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Abstract: Recent scholarship has started to open up for social and political readings of the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who John Dewey once called «the Philosopher of Democracy». The present paper attempts to promote the force and potential of this new Emersonianism for philosophy of education showing that Emerson's notions of self-reliance and aversion to conformity are not inherently anti-social, a-moral or a-political. The paper first argues that Emerson proposes an understanding of self and society which undermines any bipolar opposition of the two concepts already in «Self-Reliance». Secondly, a closer reading of the later essay «Experience» examines his critique of a particular Western conception of thinking in terms of its political consequences. If there is to be hope for the individual self, then, for Emerson, there always has to be hope for a democratic society as well. He tries to remind us that the criterion for a democratic society consists in taking seriously the subjectivity of vision of every single one of its members.

Key words: Ralph Waldo Emerson; Stanley Cavell; moral perfectionism; United States; education; philosophy of education; American pragmatism.

Resumen: Recientes estudios están empezando a abrir la obra de Ralph Waldo Emerson, a quien John Dewey una vez se refirió como «el Filósofo de la Democracia», hacia lecturas de tipo social y político. Este artículo, busca promover la fuerza y el potencial de este nuevo emersonianismo para la filosofía de la educación mostrando cómo las nociones de autosuficiencia y de aversión a la conformidad definidas por Emerson, no son inherentemente antisociales, amorales, o apolíticas. El artículo defiende, en primer lugar, que lo que Emerson propone es una comprensión del yo y de la sociedad que impide cualquier tipo de contraposición entre los dos conceptos de «auto-suficiencia». En segundo lugar, se realiza una lectura detenida de su ensayo tardío «Experiencia» donde presenta su crítica sobre la particular concepción occidental del pensamiento que tiende considerar a este con arreglo a sus consecuencias políticas. Si existe alguna esperanza para el yo individual, entonces, para Emerson, debe existir siempre la esperanza también de una sociedad democrática. Con ello, intenta recordarnos que el requisito para una sociedad democrática consiste en tomarse en serio la subjetividad de la mirada de cada uno de sus miembros.

Palabras clave: Ralph Waldo Emerson; Stanley Cavell; perfeccionismo moral; Estados Unidos; educación; filosofía de la educación; pragmatismo americano.

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1. Introduction: the «philosopher of democracy» as philosopher of education

At the first centennial of the birth of the renowned American essayist, poet and lecturer Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) none other than John Dewey himself professed that «the coming century may well make evident what is just now dawning, that Emerson is not only a philosopher, but that he is the Philosopher of Democracy» (MW 3: 190). I would like to extend Dewey´s appraisal and hope that the ideas I put forward in this paper will contribute to demonstrating the force and potential of Emerson's thinking for philosophy of education. So far, it has been chiefly due to the efforts of Naoko Saito that Emerson has come into sight as an educational philosopher, as in her study on perfectionist education, *The Gleam of Light* (2005), and in numerous papers. Stanley Cavell points out that the «remarkable revival of interest in two (perhaps *the* two) of the most famous, or influential, American claimants to the title of philosopher: John Dewey and Ralph Waldo Emerson» (Saito, 2005, p. xiii) in the late twentieth century was generally marked by a subordination of «Emerson's so-called transcendentalism (...) to Dewey's pragmatism» (Ibid.) and he lauds Saito's work for not merely repeating the «Emerson-to-Pragmatism story» (Buell, 2003, p. 220), but instead putting Emerson into perspective in his own right; giving ample space and acknowledgment to the intricate complexities and distinctive features of Emerson's thinking.

In order to introduce Emerson to those who might not yet be acquainted with him, let me first recount some important steps of his life. Educated at Harvard to become a Unitarian minister, Emerson broke with the orthodoxy shortly after the tragic death of his young wife Ellen Tucker. During his following travels to Europe he became acquainted with Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Carlyle, and, upon his return to the US, started a highly successful career as a public lecturer. Ultimately settling in Concord, Massachusetts with his second wife, Emerson came to be one of the most prominent figures of the Transcendentalist circle (including among others Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller and Nathaniel Hawthorne). Having already achieved a considerable reputation in the US with his first book *Nature* (1836) and the essay *The American Scholar* (1837), his prominence in Europe was assured by the publication of two essay series in 1841 and 1844. The death of his son Waldo at age 5 falls between these two essay series. It has been taken to mark the break between the 'early' and the 'late' Emerson by some critics and contributed to the caricature of a shift from an early adherence to «an absolutist notion of freedom to an absolutist determinsm» (Albrecht, 2012, p. 27) in his later thought. I will return to this (mis-)reading later on and illustrate that the questions of grief, religion, conventional norms and possibilities for individual digression and growth followed Emerson persistently as vivid topics throughout his career.

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While Emerson found great admirers in such eminent philosophers as James Dewey, William James, and Friedrich Nietzsche, his status as philosopher has not been uncontested. During his lifetime his popularity as a person might have outshone the depth of his writings to some extent:

> His friends and neighbors, the congregations he preached to in his younger days, the audiences that afterward listened to his lectures, all agreed in a veneration for his person which had nothing to do with their understanding or acceptance of his opinions. They flocked to him and listened to his *word*, not so much for the sake of its absolute meaning as for the atmosphere of candor, purity, and serenity that hung about it, as about a sort of sacred music (Santayana, 1900, p. 519).

A second factor contributing to the relative underestimation of Emerson's philosophy[1] is connected to the fact that Emerson never developed a consistent philosophical system and wrote in a highly literary style. The idea that Emerson positively embraced inconsistencies in his thought as part of a dynamic philosophy of life and as benefitting intellectual self-growth was not sitting well with the method-oriented mainstream of Anglo-American analytic philosophy in the 20th century. Only with the increasing research interest on American Pragmatism and the blurring of the disciplinary lines between philosophy and literature through continental philosophers such as the late Heidegger, Derrida, the later Wittgenstein, and American philosophers as Richard Rorty and, most importantly, Stanley Cavell has it been possible to appreciate anew that Emerson's «movement of thought is more compact and unified [and] combines more adequately diversity of intellectual attack with concentration of form and effect» (MW 3: 184) than most others.

One prominent trend of earlier scholarship has been to celebrate Emerson and his doctrine of «the infinitude of the private man» as the herald of American individualism to the detriment of the social and political dimensions of his thought. In combination with the strict division between an early and a late phase, the most frequent criticisms accordingly took the following shape:

> his early idealist emphasis on individual power is seen as renouncing collective politics, and as blaming suffering and inequality on people's failures to achieve individual regeneration; conversely, his late, fatalistic acquiescence is seen as discouraging political action by reinforcing a laissez-faire faith in the ability of large, impersonal forces to create a moral result (Albrecht, 2012, p. 27).

The critical perspective has changed significantly in the last decades. As Lawrence Buell points out in the foreword to *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Bicentenary*

[1] As Cavell writes in 1988, «There has been no serious move, as far as I know, within the ensuing discipline of American philosophy to *take up Emerson philosophically*» (Cavell, 1988, p. 14).

Appraisals, «recent Emerson studies demonstrate that the focus on the `social` and `political` dimensions of his thought (...) is indeed here to stay for some time to come» (Tharaud, 2006, 10). Furthermore, Emerson scholarship´s increasing focus on the `late` Emerson has not only been able to demonstrate more clearly the distortions of Stephen E. Whicher's paradigmatic division of a ‹late› and an ‹early› Emerson, but also promoted a renewed understanding of Emerson as a public intellectual and political activist. In the light of this trend, the argument I want to make in the following certainly seems to find itself in good company. But I need to specify more clearly in which sense I would like to reclaim Emerson's idea of self (or self-reliance) as one that does not exclude the social, the moral and the political, and in which sense I think this can already be found in his earlier work. It was the fact that Emerson remained largely silent on questions such as that of slavery, which encouraged «his critics, as not long ago his admirer Harold Bloom and his detractor John Updike, to imagine that Emerson gave up on the hope of democracy» (Cavell, 1995, p. 227). I want to suggest, on the contrary, that Emerson has neither given up on society, nor on morality, nor on the hope of democracy, but I am not going to appeal to his work as a public intellectual and activist in order to show this. Rather, drawing chiefly on Stanley Cavell´s reading of Emerson, I wish to show that, when taken seriously as a philosophical writer, Emerson´s writing proposes an understanding of self and society which undermines any bipolar opposition of the two concepts as early as in «Self-Reliance», and that it is in this way that we can see that, if there is to be hope for the individual self, then, for Emerson, there has to be hope for a democratic society as well.

When I am trying to show in the following in which way I think Emerson's conception of individuality is such that it is not one that implies a mere distancing from society, and is thus not an inherently anti-social and a-political concept, I will do that in two steps. First, mainly looking at «Self-Reliance», I am concerned with a specification of how the relation between the self that Emerson tells us to rely upon and the others, the conformist society, is to be understood (section 2). This step requires a clarification not only of what Emerson means by conformism, self, and self-reliance, but also of how he conceptualizes the specific interrelations between society and self. In a second step (section 3) I will then continue with a closer reading of his essay «Experience» in which Emerson is – amongst other topics – concerned with the specific relation of thinking and acting. In my view, his critique of a particular Western conception of thinking leads him to press for a specific form of action which only at the surface appears as a recommendation for inaction and suffering.

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2. The self and the other

2.1. *Desperation with Conformism*

One of the most memorable statements of «Self-Reliance» is certainly Emerson's exclaiming, «I appeal from your customs. I must be myself» (CW 2: 73). But whose customs does he appeal from and why? Emerson's assessment of the present state of American society at his time is more than bleak and immediately reminiscent of Tocqueville's diagnosis of a «tyranny of the majority» in America. Authenticity is nowhere to be found and conformism is widely held to be the most valuable of all virtues. It is right in the beginning of the essay that Emerson confronts us with the distinction between the «original» and the «conventional» (CW 2: 45). He draws this distinction with respect to writing, and almost directly pairs the original writing with the work of «genius» (Ibid.) which makes use of the «light which flashes across his mind from within» (Ibid.). Genius abides by its «spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility» (CW 2: 46) and listens to the «power which resides in him» (Ibid.), whereas in the multitude we look up to «the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages» (CW 2: 45) and take «with shame our own opinion from another» (CW 2: 46). Society, as it presents itself to Emerson everywhere in his time, is

> in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity (CW 2: 50).

It might thus appear very early on in the essay that what Emerson wants to do is promote an inner power of the individual genius against the conventionalism and conformism of society at large so that he immediately seems liable to the charge of supporting an elitist, anti-social form of individualism incompatible with democratic politics.

This first impression is further supported by the sheer boredom, and even disgust, he expresses with regard to all the mundane societal habits and attitudes: We «must consider what a blindman's-buff is this game of conformity» because «if I know your sect I anticipate your argument» (S 54), and «the sour faces of the multitude, like their sweet faces, have no deep cause, but are put on and off as the wind blows and a newspaper directs» (CW 2: 55f.). The utter disdain he expresses in these passages might well suggest a completely misanthropist attitude towards his fellow men. Later he continues that «Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not say ‹I think,› ‹I am,› but quotes some saint or sage» (CW 2: 67), and he tells us that he is «ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions» (CW

2: 51). In *Experience* he extends this scathing judgment to the whole history of literature, which is reducible to «a sum of very few ideas and of very few original tales» (CW 3: 47). In the same vein, he also states in *Self-Reliance*: «each word they say chagrins us» (CW 2: 55).

As adults, so Emerson, we have become socialized into timidly following societal conventions and rules, but this state of obedience makes us utterly unhappy and ashamed of ourselves, and for the majority of the people there seems to be no way out from this dependency on other people's opinion and rules. The promise of dissociating and unbinding ourselves from the customs first and foremost lies in winning back a certain independence from a state of being which pains and means suffering. In this sense, Emerson's crushing sentencing of his fellow men must be seen to include himself as well. When he speaks about «the forced smile which we put on in company where we do not feel at ease, in answer to conversation which does not interest us» (CW 2: 55), he includes himself in the «we» and expresses his *own* shame and chagrin. From the passages I just quoted one might well conclude that Emerson's main concern is with «the infringement of civil society (...) on the domain of individuals» (Hodge, 2006, p. 301), as David Justin Hodge suggests. The idea that Emerson worries not so much about the harm he might cause others (as when he is teaching the «doctrine of hate» (CW 2: 51), but about others «causing harm *to him*» (Ibid.), and that «society is antagonistic to (...) individual development» (Hodge, 2006, p. 302) appears to me only partly right. It is a correct assessment insofar as conformism indeed seems to threaten human life and existence, the «I am», for Emerson. However, Hodge´s description suggests that Emerson opens up a dualism between the individual and society, between an «I» and the «others». But the dualism between the original (or the self-reliant, the aversive) and the conformist is not to be understood in this way. Hodge's appeal to this individual's revolt against a society perceived as threatening one's very existence is misleading insofar as it completely disregards that the «counterpoint to the conformist act» (Hodge, 2006, p. 305) does not «emanate from within» (Ibid.), but that the conformist threat of a paralyzing, uninformative stagnancy (Ibid.) is deeply ingrained in each and every one of society's members, also in Emerson himself. The dualist choice between the conformist and the original is a line that does not divide the individual from the mass. If Emerson bemoans, «But now we are a mob. Man does not stand in awe of man» (CW 2: 71), not only does he make himself part of the mob, he also clearly envisions a state where man can stand in awe of man again. What we find here is an opposition of «mob» and «man», which is to be read as human here - something that is present in every single individual of society. The sort of desperation in face of not living up to being human is something that Emerson presupposes as being a shared feeling of shame in most of his contemporaries.

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We find a ring of the depth of the pain, the sincerity which the pressure for conformity causes in him, the sense in which the suffocating of his desire for truthful expression is experienced as life-threating when he writes that «imitation is suicide» (CW 2: 27). Upon experiencing this threat to our very existence as human beings, a man must realize, so Emerson, «that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion» (CW 2: 28). Lawrence Buell points to the fact that this mocking of the Christian marriage vow implies a certain austerity in Emerson's recommendation of self-reliance. Self-reliance does not promise «an easy consolation» it «brings (...) not necessarily comfort and joy» (Buell, 2003, p. 71). It is this authenticity of Emerson's personal affectedness, the sincerity and desperation expressed, and his emotional austerity in his recommending of a self-reliant practice, as a last resort for those finding themselves in a state of utter desperation, as a last resort «in the face of human dispossession and voicelessness» (Cavell, 1990, p. 62) which might caution one very early on to read his appeal to genius (and the like) as a gesture that is directed in a straightforward manner against society or humankind as such (consisting of a majority of conformists). Furthermore, it may point one to the idea that there might be a deeply moral concern at the bottom of Emerson's preaching «the doctrine of hate» (CW 2: 51).

2.2. *The Self as Universal and Exemplar*

But where are we to turn to? Emerson tells us that the commonly held virtue is conformity and that «Self-Reliance is its aversion» (CW 2: 50). So are we to turn away from conformity and toward the self? What is this self? When Emerson asks, «Who is the Trustee? What is the aboriginal Self, on which a universal reliance may be grounded?» (SR: 63), he answers his own question with appeal to terms like «Spontaneity», «Instinct», and «Intuition», or «the last fact behind which analysis cannot go» (SR: 64). This leads Hodge to state that self-reliance seems «at once a practical, psychological attitude and a rather abstract conceptual invention» (Hodge, 2006, p. 299). Hodge comes to critically qualify this first impression in the course of his paper, taking the abstract and obscure character of the concept as a sign for the fact that «agency and identity are not decipherable concepts at last, but ineluctable conditions» (Idem., p. 318) which is *demonstrated* in Emerson's work. However, this goes hand in hand with him stating that it is a certain «*sentiment*, and not conceptualization» (Ibid.) which was Emerson's main contribution. Against this move of placing Emerson vaguely within a Romantic sentimentalist tradition, Cavell cautions that

> those who find Emerson incapable of thought style him a philosopher of Intuition, occluding the teacher of Tuition. Tuition is what Emerson's writing presents itself to be throughout; hence, of course, to be articulating Intuition. It is when Emerson thinks of thinking, or conversion, as oppositional, or critical, that he calls it aversion (Cavell, 1990, p. 36).

I think that this observation of Cavell's is quite valuable. If we start to stylize Emerson as merely providing a new «sentiment», we run the danger of a too easy psychologization of his critical endeavor. The appeal to and reliance on intuition does indeed mean «being averted – turned away – from a conformist move» (Hodge, 2006, p. 307), but it does not, as Hodge insinuates, imply «being turned *toward* another node of focus (...), a conforming to one's self» (Ibid.). In order for us to turn towards such a self, an essentialist conception of self would be presupposed.

But this would be the «poor external way of speaking» (CW 2: 69) of self-reliance. Becoming independent from conformism might indeed seem more than effortless if we think of it as turning away from everybody else and just sticking to ourselves, listening to the inner dictates of our instincts in the sense of ever changing desires and shallow impulses, isolating ourselves from society and willfully following through on our desires. But Emerson emphasizes that «It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude» (CW 2: 53f). Furthermore, he does not mean self-reliance in the sense of aversion to conformity in any superficial way. «The other terror that scares us from self-trust is our consistency» (CW 2: 56) and this «foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds» (CW 2: 57). So «conforming to images that have become dead to you» (CW 2: 54) scatters your force just as much when these images are the individual's own images; it means that self-reliance implies aversion also to our individual old beliefs and habits, not just to averse ourselves to the others. Self-reliance thus means acknowledging the fact that «the soul becomes» (CW 2: 69), being open to change, development, to the future, and taking on the task to ever create ourselves anew – on an individual just as much as on a societal level. Self-reliance, for Emerson, is never a turn toward an inner essence away from society, but a continual practice of *self-creation by aversion* to, by turning ourselves back on, elements of our practice that have grown old and dead.

In this sense, self-reliance does not require us to «possess genius in order to develop it» (Hodge, 2006, p. 315). Rather, genius in Emerson's sense is universally distributed among all humans – at least in its potential. This idea is expressed in intimate statements such as, «All men have my blood and I have all men's» (CW 2: 71). This fundamental equality of all individuals at the bottom disarranges the meaning of «individual» to a point where it seems to be of no importance to Emerson to speak of differentiable persons and «the whole realm of personhood starts to seem strangely alien and faraway» (Buell, 2003, p. 75). But we have to take a closer and deeper look in order to understand what this universality means for Emerson: «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.

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Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost» (CW 2: 45). It is one favored move of Emerson to to blur the line between the meanings of the terms «private» and «public». There is a passage in the «American Scholar» where it says, «the deeper he dives into his privatest, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds this is the most acceptable, most public, and universally true» (CW 1: 103). While the apparent, perfunctory private can be in stark opposition between different individuals, and more often than not be of less than any public value, our inmost and deepest private selves are not only the same for each and every one of us, but articulate that which is of most importance to the public. As I will try to show further on, I believe that Emerson is speaking in these passages on the «universal self» – in a way deeply indebted to Kant – of the moral conscience that is universal to all human beings. The moral conscience as the genius, the highest, the most illustrious, is absolutely ordinary and therefore exemplary. As Cavell writes, the «good of the culture to be found is already universally distributed *or else it is nothing*» (Cavell, 1990, p. 49. My emphasis).

I will return to this point in a moment and try to illustrate it further. But for now, I would like to first draw attention to and pinpoint the problem that Emerson opens up. The problem which Emerson struggles with has the form of a paradox. It is the paradox inherent in democratic theory of how to upbuild, how to originate a «natural aristocrat», «one man» whose «private life (…) shall be a more illustrious monarchy» (CW 1: 107). The question of how such a beginning of a true democracy can be accomplished is only solvable for Emerson by «a constitution of the public and at the same time an institution of the private, a new obligation to think for ourselves, to make ourselves intelligible, in every word» (Cavell, 1990, p. 45). It is important to note that here, again, the line between private and public is being transgressed by Emerson, and not reinforced. But if Emerson insists on the existence of a «universal mind», how is it, Buell asks with Newfield, that «inspiration differs from herd instinct» (Buell, 2003, p. 75), or, if inspiration is really so rare, does Emerson eventually only care about «superheros» (Ibid.)? Buell's answer to both critical concerns is negative. Self-Reliance neither promotes «de-individuation» nor «megalomania», but «disowns both» (Idem., p. 76) because it uses «‹I› in such a way that would acknowledge, indeed proclaim, subjectivity of vision, but offer the ‹I› as exemplary of any person's capabilities and sink egotism into precept» (Idem., p. 77). Cavell shares this conviction. Emerson's writing – in all its exclusiveness – should «not just be tolerated but treasured by the friends of democracy» (Cavell, 1990, p. 50) because «the acceptance of an exemplar, as access to another realm» is grounded «in the relation between the instance and the individual other» and not in a relation between «the instance and a class of instances» (Ibid.). In this way,

Emerson reclaims a relation of the individual with a concrete other who – and this is what makes this other «genius» – presents a way of living which can serve as an exemplary representation of a «higher self», which can give re-orientation in states of utter despair and self-dissatisfaction. But these exemplars are important not because they ask to be treated as a higher class of natural aristocrats to which the masses are to submit (as was Carlyle´s vision), rather, «for Emerson, what justifies paying attention to ‹great men› is their value as disposable models» (Buell, 2003, p. 63). Discussing the influences of Emerson's idea of self-reliance, Buell names republican-democratic political theory as shaping the conviction that «though everyone falls short of self-realization much of the time, everyone has self-transformative capacity», thus extending the Puritan belief in the few elect by predestination to «include potentially everyone» and formulating a «democratized vision of the inherent equality and value of person» (Idem., p. 62). He further highlights that it is in its «celebration of the latent capacities of all individual persons, that Self-Reliance begins to look most like ‹democratic individuality› as against liberal individualism» (Idem., p. 76).

The idea first and foremost is illustrated in Emerson's writing itself as well as in his attitudes towards other writers› work: «In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty» (CW 2: 46). This is what makes genius exemplary. Because it confronts us with our own rejected self, with our own self-dissatisfaction, showing us our own internal standard – our own «higher and happier aspirations» (Cavell, 1990, p. 51), but not in the sense of our superficial wishes for outstanding achievement, social status, or the like. It also does not mean that we have to sit and wait to be struck by an extraordinary epiphany. Rather, the «genius» work reminds us to take our own *everyday* impressions as significant and make them audible, visible, and understandable to others by being a representation of such an attempt at articulating «rejected thoughts». It reinforces us to acknowledge our own right to our deeper aspirations of not having to live in an everyday state of shame, in a state where we prefer stagnancy over change and constantly ignore recurrent, common ideas of how things could be done better. «So all that is said of the wise man by Stoic or Oriental or modern essayist, describes to each reader his own idea, describes his unattained but attainable self» (CW 2: 7).

2.3. *Moralisms and Morality*

During the last pages I have insinuated a couple of times that I find a moral core in Emerson's thinking despite his frequent scorn of moralism. This is the place at which I will try to make good on my promise. The main point to keep in mind is that I believe that what Emerson is up to is trying to bring to light the difference between a false moralism («conformism» in his words), and moral

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action in its original sense. The parts on which certain Emersonianisms draw in what I find to be misappropriations of his thought read, for example, like the following: «No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what is against it» (CW 2: 50). As Cavell concedes, what might be held against Emerson is that he advances «a hatred of moralism (...) so passionate and ceaseless as to seem sometimes to amount to a hatred of morality altogether» (Cavell, 1990, p. 47). Furthermore, the «expression of disgust with (...) the present state of things» often appears so complete as to command «a transformation of things, and before all a transformation of the self» that amounts to nothing more but obscurantism and self-absorption (Ibid.). Buell similarly worries that Emerson's «essays do in fact sometimes treat feats of entrepreneurial rapacity or imperial conquest with a certain gusto» (Buell, 2003, p. 70). However, when reading Emerson's texts one finds him cautioning against such misinterpretation in equal measure.

A remark in *Circles* comes to mind, where he writes: «The terror of reform is the discovery that we must cast away our virtues, or what we have always esteemed such, into the same pit that has consumed our grosser vices» (CW 2: 317). The qualification «what we have always esteemed such» refers us to the idea that it is not virtue or morality as such which is to be cast away into a pit, but that we are to free ourselves of virtues which we wrongly esteemed to be virtues whereas, in fact, they are vices. This idea is also supported by various remarks in *Self-Reliance* such as when he is specifying: «The populace think that your rejection of popular standards is a rejection of all standard, and mere antinomianism; (...) But the law of consciousness abides» (CW 2: 73). It will be important to look at how exactly we are to interpret the idea that «the law of consciousness abides». But first another quote by Emerson:

> If any man consider the present aspects of what is called by distinction society, he will see the need of these ethics. The sinew and heart of man seem to be drawn out, and we arebecome timorous, desponding whimperers. We are afraid of truth, afraid of fortune, afraid of death, and afraid of each other. (...) Our housekeeping is mendicant, our arts, ouroccupations, our marriages, our religion we have not chosen, but society has chosen for us. We are parlor soldiers (CW 2: 75).

As should be clear from this passage, Emerson is not abdicating morality, but arguing for a new ethics that is to put an end to the prevailing false moralism he perceives. Also, I believe that it shows that Emerson does not merely reject «conscious choice in favor of attention to an inner voice», because he was «disposed to agonize over vocational and other life choices», as Buell would have it. Buell only devotes very little space to the moral ideas in «Self-Reliance», but

I find his statement that «Self-Reliance» «rests on a moral philosophy obverse to Kant» (Buell, 2003, p. 73) very hard to follow. To say the least, it rests on a very narrow and superficial reading of Kant. But it is not the place to go into further detail on this topic here. I appreciate how he beautifully draws out the stark contrast of Emerson's moral individualism with capitalist possessive individualism, but I think he does not do full justice by Emerson's thought. As above with regard to the problem of stylizing Emerson as a philosopher of sentiment, I wish to emphasize here that if one takes a closer look at Kant's ethics, Emerson's thoughts on morality and his disdain of conformist moralism appear in large parts very close to central Kantian ideas. I think it is in particular the Kantian distinction between autonomy and heteronomy which we are to look at if we try to understand Emerson's distinction between the original and the conventional, between the self-reliant and the conformist.

In the *Groundwork* Kant uncovers the principle of autonomy – the ability of moral persons to give laws to themselves – as the condition of possibility for moral action. As Kant's famous saying in the *Preface* goes, «for in order that an action should be morally good, it is not enough that it *conform* to the moral law, but it must also be done *for the sake of the law*» (Kant, 1949, p. 5). Therefore, for Kant, morality «is the relation of actions to the autonomy of the will» (Idem., p. 56). In this way he generalizes the idea Rousseau develops in his *Contrat Social*, namely that the ability to obey self-given laws is freedom, into the basic foundational principle of morality and the most important pillar of his moral theory. Heteronomy, in contrast, is the basic principle underlying all non-moral will and encompasses all forms of will which are determined by something other than the moral law itself, viz. our natural inclinations, desires, personal interests, threats of punishment, etc. The reason for all previous attempts at finding the principle of morality remaining unsuccessful, according to Kant, is that the binding laws were always thought to require «some interest, either by way of attraction or constraint» (Idem., p. 49) and never understood as originating «as a law from *his own* will, but this will was according to a law obliged by *something else* to act in a certain manner» (Ibid.). In a negative sense, autonomy – having a free will – means being independent from all material (empirical) determination as otherwise the moral law could never be universal, but at the most a general law; positively it means self-legislation. Kant conceives of «*the will of every rational being as a universally legislative will*» (Idem., p. 48) with the will being «not subject to the law, but so subject that it must be regarded *as itself giving the law*» (Ibid.). Autonomy of the will, then «is that property of it by which it is a law to itself» (Kant: 57). But this does not mean that everybody is free to give themselves whichever law they like because the principle of autonomy says, «Always so to choose that the same volition shall comprehend the maxims of our choice as a universal law» (Idem., p. 57).

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As human beings we have needs and desires which are shaped by society and history. This is why the moral law, for Kant, has the form of an imperative. However, morality as self-legislation does not imply a complete negation of our drives, and needs, and social dependencies, only they cannot be the last determining ground of our lives, and they cannot be the fundamental principle of morality because autonomy implies to regard ourselves from a standpoint where we are more than just physically and socially determined beings; it implies seeing our truly human self in this surplus, in our ability to be moral in this sense of adhering to rules that we set for ourselves. Kant has sometimes been misunderstood (for example by some existentialists) as saying that you have to begin from nothing in order to be free, neither does he profess an empty rationality or moral rigorism. Acting heteronomously is not constituted by you helping a friend, but by your *only* helping friends. Autonomous action means to *still* act morally (i. e. to help, to be honest,…) even in cases where neither natural inclination nor social convention binds you to do so. In this sense «*Autonomy* (...) is the basis of the dignity of human and of every rational nature» (Kant, 1949, p. 53).

Maybe, after this brief digression on Kant's moral theory, Cavell's interpretation of «Self-Reliance» as «virtually a study of shame» (Cavell 1990: 47) will have a more persuasive power. In Cavell´s view, what Emerson addresses when he bemoans that people are mostly «timorous, desponding whimperers» and «parlor soldiers» (CW 2: 75) is that morality in the Kantian sense of autonomy is nowhere to be found in his society. In order to change this state we do not have to become self-reliant on the selves we are now, but we have to «transform our conformity, as if we are to be born (again)» (Cavell, 1990, p. 47). The real tragedy of the present state of shame Emerson diagnoses lies not only in people not being autonomous, but in the reason for *why* they are not. People should be ashamed of not being ashamed of their immorality. However, the right to be moral does not seem to even appear as an actual option any longer. It was Mill who about a decade after Emerson drives the point home quite succinctly: «I do not mean that they choose what is customary in preference to what suits their own inclination. It does not occur to them to have any inclination except for what is customary» (Mill, 1996, p. 640). In the transformative act of overcoming conformity, becoming self-reliant would then mean to become ashamed of our shameless state, and thus reinstate the «conditions of the moral life, (...) the possibility of responsibility over our lives, (...) responding to our lives rather than bearing them dumbly or justifying them automatonically» (Cavell, 1990, p. 48). Emerson´s thinking, for Cavell, has a different purpose than theories of moral reasoning. Emerson's question cannot be answered by calculation and judgment because it is not about a decision between different available options. Rather, Emerson finds himself in the situation where there seems to be no option available whatsoever; hence his

thought is to be understood as «a response to the way´s being lost» (Cavell, 1990, p. 55). Thus, Emerson's thinking presents itself «as stopping, and as finding a way *back,* as if thinking is remembering something»[2] (Ibid.). If it is true, as I claimed towards the end of section 2.2., that «Self-Reliance» is to confront us with our own rejected or repressed selves, and Emerson´s text illustrates for us what the conversion to an upright human posture could look like, then I think this is what he is trying to have us find the way back to.

There is one important difference between Kant and Emerson that I would like to draw attention to, though. If Kant conceives of the human being as a mixed creature because we belong to the world of sense as well as to the world of intellect, for Emerson the human being is split in a different way. Consider Emerson's high esteem of friendship. The poem in the beginning of «Friendship» reads, «All things through thee take nobler form/ And look beyond the earth,/ (...) Me too thy nobleness has taught/ To master my despair;/ The fountains of my hidden life/ Are through thy friendship fair» (CW 2: 189). So the mark of the human condition that reveals us as split beings is in Emerson's thought the friend – our other, better half (as in the myth of the sadly split in half spherical creatures in Plato´s *Symposium*). Such a friend (who at times can also take on the form of an enemy) has the ability to bring out our rejected self by representing it to us, and inspiring and encouraging us in times of despair that the self can always be furthered.

This idea of the self as ever perfectible leads Cavell to group Emerson with other moral perfectionists[3]. A widespread prejudgment regarding moral perfectionism is about the dangerous tendency to ever search and wait for the superhero (as later in Nietzsche's «superman»), but in a more generous interpretation based on Emerson's conception of friendship, there is no final (or initial) self to search for, neither in this world, nor in a world beyond. In Kant, «the noble ideal of a universal kingdom of *ends in themselves* (rational beings), to which we can belong as members then only when we carefully conduct ourselves according to

[2] Cavell is here alluding to Socrates' theory of *anamnesis* as presented in Plato's dialogue *Meno*.

[3] In his *A Theory of Justice* John Rawls describes a teleological moral theory which he calls perfectionism and attributes to Nietzsche. In its extreme version this theory suggests as the single principle for societal institutions and obligations «to maximize the achievement of human excellence, in art, in science, and culture» (Rawls, 1971, p. 325). This doctrine implies for Rawls that society should be arranged in such a way as to allow for a few great men, a few geniuses, and their idea of the good life to strive; hence, necessitating the rest of the common populace to subordinate their lives and ideas of a good life to this new class of aristocrats. In such a theory the liberty and autonomy, which in a democratic society we take to be the natural right of each single member of society, seems to be undermined if not wholly negated right from the start. Indeed, when Nietzsche writes: «Mankind must work continually to produce individual great human beings–this and nothing else is the task» and that «only by our living for the good of the rarest and most valuable specimens» our «individual life [is to] retain the highest value, the deepest significance» (Rawls, 1971, p. 325, note 5), this elitist principle appears diametrically opposed to any idea of a democratic life. I cannot go into detail on whether this reading of Nietzsche is justified, but for the purpose of this paper, I hope I have given enough support for not reading Emerson in section 2.3.

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the maxims of freedom as if they were laws of nature» (Kant, 1949, p. 80) lies at the end of a Utopian projection into the future. In Emerson, the grasping of my partiality, my dependence on a friend to confront me with my better aspirations, leads to my having to take on the task of «realizing my partiality» (Cavell, 1990, p. 61). The age-old skeptical worry about the loss of any foundation, the loss of the world, the loss of knowledge, the loss of meaning, the loss of knowing what is right and what is wrong is not to be overcome theoretically for Emerson. It is not to be overcome by getting to a point at which we finally reach the foundation or finally find back to it. With the skeptical question remaining an always open possibility that can never be irrevocably refuted, what remains for us is to «do our work». Cavell writes that self-reliance as aversion «is a *continual turning away* from society, it is thereby a continual turning *toward* it» (Idem., 59). For the consequence which Emerson draws from the unresolvable problem of skepticism this can mean that we should always continue our work of trying to find and be the friend who challenges and illustrates an ideal which will let us begin to imagine a world where we actually are ashamed of our shame, the friend who provides anew the condition for imagining a moral world in the face of an apparent loss of or desperation with humanity.

According to Buell, it is self-reliance's public contribution, in addition to the personal benefit, that it defends «individuals against social pressure» (2003, p. 77). I would prefer to rephrase this interpretation and say that self-reliance's private as well as public contribution is to defend the renewal against reified, merely habitual customs. This allows for moral imagining, *the* precondition for morality. In this sense Buell is right. Self-reliance «prescribes not insular withdrawal, but more robust coexistence», (Idem., p. 78) because a society of moral people is stronger than a society of cowards who are «no longer upright; [and dare] not say ‹I think,› ‹I am,›» (CW 2: 67) thereby forfeiting that which constitutes them as moral beings, that which distinguishes them as humans. Buell observes that «Emerson believed (...) in a moral foundation to the self that would give the lie to our customarily shortsighted ways of choosing if only we listened to it. This moral self or ‹moral sense,› furthermore, he felt not simply or mainly as a check but as a source of creative energy» (Buell, 2003, p. 73). This is true insofar as Emerson indeed believes in a moral foundation of the self. He is wrong, however, in thinking that this foundation is to be understood as «moral sense», for reasons I tried to spell out above. But, nevertheless, I think it is a beautiful and extremely important gesture of Buell´s to point out the productive and creative potential Emerson finds in morality in its proper sense. In this sense Emerson is a much better interpreter of Kant's ideas than most of the widespread readings who up to date think that Kant was propagating a narrow-minded, rigid, and joyless duty-based ethics.

3. Thinking and acting

In the previous part of the paper I was concerned with Emerson's views on morality and tried to show that his thinking is not meant as recommending a moral relativism or an amoral attitude. It now remains to ask about the relevance of his thought for politics. In response to a first draft of Kateb's *Emerson and Self-Reliance* Cavell emphasized that, in spite of his general sympathy with Kateb's approach to underline Emerson's importance for political thinking, the difference between his reading and Kateb's is that «it is Emerson as a philosopher whose pertinence to democracy I am concerned to assess» (Cavell, 1994, p. 958). Whereas Kateb differentiates between different forms and levels of self-reliance in order to show in which way there is room for the possibility of political action in Emerson's conception of self-reliance, and in which way Emerson tells us that we *must* act, Cavell understands Emerson's notion of self-reliance in such a way that, as an aversion of conformity, a self-reliant act is an action in word *or* deed; it is «an aversive address [which] may be taken toward oneself as much as toward any institution», and «not thus to address the self is to harbor conformity» (Idem., p. 957). So the political choice is not merely to put distance between oneself and society, as in Kateb's picture of the self as «essentially unsociable» (Idem., p. 956), but it is to find a way to cope with the difference between a democracy as we imagine it in an ideal world of thought and democracy as it is (the difference between the ideal and the empirical). To my mind, then, Emerson tries to recapture the idea of democracy as something other than Tocqueville's «tyranny of the majority». He tries to remind us of the idea of democracy where the criterion for a democratic society consists in *taking seriously the subjectivity of vision of every single one of its members*.

In «Experience» Emerson reassures us, «I know that the world I converse with in the city and in the farms, is not the world I *think*» *(*CW 3: 84). As human beings we are defined by our inhabiting the world of thought and the practical world *at once*. This is the Kantian dualism which Emerson inherits. He knows that these two worlds «are not in communication, but eclipse one another» (Cavell, 1994, p. 958) so that in order for us to keep and continuously recover our humanity, we have to bear their sometimes despairing separateness and distance where «the hope of the one lies in not denying the other, which each would love to do» (Ibid.). Emerson´s importance to democracy as a thinker is then rightly understood in showing us that this division is not to be reduced to something taking place between my thinking and imagining a better democracy and the others› (society´s) bad practice, but that self-reliance as the aversion of conformity is a necessary feature we all have to practice in order to maintain democracy as a possibility. I pointed out before: Self-reliance always also means self-aversion. As Cavell concludes, «it is the measure of Emerson's strength, and the value of

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his writing, that it bears the suffering of this perception of *our separation from ourselves*, that he records it (...) in the power of his self-aversive sentences, as each converts and transfigures our common language» (Cavell, 1994, p. 958. My emphasis). In order to understand more fully the kind of reading of Emerson that Cavell puts forth in contrast to Kateb, I want to shortly take a closer look at Emerson's essay «Experience», in particular at the kind of relation between thinking and acting he conceives there. What is thinking for Emerson?

The main theme of «Experience» is without doubt Emerson's search for a way of dealing with the tragic loss of his son Waldo. Even if Waldo is only mentioned in the beginning of the essay, he only appears to be forgotten thereafter on the surface. As argued by Sharon Cameron (1986), Waldo actually structures the entire essay in his absent presence as an incorporated lost object. Barbara Packer (1982) similarly highlights Emerson´s ability to incorporate the death of his son (and wife, and brother). In any case, the topic of grief is particularly prominent in the first part of the essay. But this grief – even if it is informed by the death of his son – is not primarily about the loss of his son; it seems to be more about the tragic feeling of not being able to mourn, about the inability to understand this death when he writes: «I grieve that grief can teach me nothing» (CW 3: 49), and that «In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate,—no more. I cannot get it nearer to me» (CW 3: 48). All attempts at trying to grasp reality seem to fail («There are moods in which we court suffering, in the hope that here at least we shall find reality» (CW 3: 48). Instead all he finds is illusion: «Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion. Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and as we pass through them they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus» (CW 3: 50).

What the experience of Waldo's death means to Emerson is not just a tragic feeling of loss of reality as a whole, but he paints a picture of the human condition where the «evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers» (CW 3: 49) appears most strongly «then when we clutch hardest» (Ibid.). This leads Emerson to reconsider traditional oppositions of the thinking subject that in applying concepts to objects comes to some sort of understanding, to some sort of knowledge of the world. Rather, his portrayals of the tragic impossibility of getting the world near, to know it in a sense of taking possession of it, lead him to realize that within the confines of an empiricist understanding of experience and a corresponding epistemology relying on the characteristic subject-object dualism, it is impossible to bridge the gap between subject and object. This «paltry empiricism» (CW 3: 85) leads to a despair with the limits of our condition which Emerson wants to overcome. In

contrast, he lists «Illusion, Temperament, Succession, Surface, Surprise, Reality, Subjectiveness», as «the lords of life» (CW 3: 82f.). In these moods we experience the world as a whole:

> The secret of the illusoriness is in the necessity of a succession of moods or objects. Gladly we would anchor, but the anchorage is quicksand. This onward trick of nature is too strong for us: *Pero si muove*. When at night I look at the moon and stars, I seem stationary, and they to hurry. Our love of the real draws us to permanence, but health of body consists in circulation, and sanity of mind in variety or facility of association (CW 3: 55).

Here, I find Emerson to be undermining and transcending any distinction between subjectivity and objectivity. The anchor lies neither in the subject nor in the object. The truth Emerson finds in the moods, his discernment of process and succession as the fundamental nature of our being *and* of nature, means that we «do not have a universe as it is in itself», but we «do not have selves in themselves either» (Cavell, 1979, p. 170). If we understand that we have to give up on understanding thinking as clutching, how are we to go on from there? How can we think of thinking in a different way?

Emerson reverses Kant's picture of thinking (or knowledge) as the active, spontaneous side of ours which subdues the world under its categories. Instead, he likens thinking to passiveness, reception, and thanking: «The great gifts are not got by analysis» (CW 3: 62), but «All writing comes by the grace of God, and all doing and having» (CW 3: 69). The idea of the passive, and receptive character of thinking is complemented by Emerson's repeated insistence on patience in opposition to the prevailing instrumentalist, calculative pragmatism which asks for results and demands success in practice before real thinking can even start: «People disparage knowing and the intellectual life, and urge doing. I am very content with knowing, if only I could know. (...) To know a little would be worth the expense of this world» (CW 3: 84). But this is not a recommendation for inaction. In «Self-Reliance» Emerson advises, «But do your work, and I shall know you. Do your work, and you shall reinforce yourself» (CW 2: 54). This is still true for «Experience». But here he warns us not to expect results too quickly because «We do not know today whether we are busy or idle» (CW 3: 46). Relying on his own experience, he now tells us that the «results of life are uncalculated and uncalculable. The years teach much which the days never know» (CW 3: 69). He does not negate Jesus´old wisdom «You will know them by their fruits» (Matthew 7: 16); however, he tries to draw attention to an overhasty misunderstanding of its meaning.

In the beginning of the essay, Emerson wrote, «Our life is not so much threatened as our perception» (CW 3: 45), implying that the imminent deathreat is not to be overcome by more and faster of the same old action. Rather,

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it is our way of thinking and speaking about ourselves and the world that needs changing first. Our actions will then follow in line. Therefore, for Emerson, what we need most urgently is a new picture of life, a new philosophy:

> Onward and onward! In liberated moments we know that a new picture of life and duty is already possible; the elements already exist in many minds around you of a doctrine of life which shall transcend any written record we have. The new statement will comprise the scepticisms as well as the faiths of society, and out of unbeliefs a creed shall be formed. For scepticisms are not gratuitous or lawless, but are limitations of the affirmative statement, and the new philosophy must take them in and make affirmations outside of them, just as much as it must include the oldest beliefs (CW 3: 75).

The experience of Waldo's death teaches Emerson that we need a new philosophy to help us recover from loss. It also teaches him that we cannot recover from loss altogether; that there is no way to overcome skepticism (or illusion) by clutching harder. The task for this new philosophy to be found, a philosophy without foundation neither in subject nor object, a philosophy that sets out to find our way back from loss, death, and despair into life is to transform «American success and Kantian succession into a passive practice». It has to be an «instruction in mortality, finitude» (Cavell, 1989, p. 117). We have to take seriously our conditionedness, our limitedness and poverty. In this lies the hope for a human world. In letting go of the clutching, in abandoning, and leaving lies our way out of despair. Gaining hope means letting go of despair. «Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat; up again, old heart!» (CW 3: 86). Emerson does not present a solution, but he points into the direction of where a new way could lead. Furthermore, he tries to show us the necessity of the abandoning of despair because the distance between the ideal and the real is never to be overcome (not by any anti-skeptical argument anyway). The skeptical worry has the function of reminding us that we are not final; we are not at the end; there is still work to do.

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