

## Emerson: A Powerful Voice for Moral Authenticity, But is Power Enough?

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I approached this essay with the same delight of anticipation as I feel when approaching Emerson's essays, and also the same caution at what might be described as an Emersonian optimism towards philosophical rigor. While Emerson's strength of vision and insight into character are thrilling, some of their weight seems to rest on what Alasdair MacIntyre, quoting J.M. Keynes's description of the Bloomsbury Group's moral thinking, has called "the accents of infallibility." He says: "In practice, victory [in moral argument] was with those who could speak with the greatest appearance of clear, undoubting conviction." more than with those who developed what might count as reasons to adopt a given point of view.<sup>1</sup>

William Gilman, in the introduction to his selection of Emerson's writing, points to something like this, saying:

Emerson's method was to write down in the heat of inspired vision the truth as it seemed to him at the moment, regardless of contrary perceptions he might have had at other moments....Perhaps the answer to all the problems raised...is that he could only hope, deeply, instinctively, that what he saw and reported was true, in essence and in form [and even finding that]....As we have seen, his multiple vision frequently left him totally bewildered as to certainty.<sup>2</sup>

Consider Naoko Saito's statement in "On the Education of the Heart" that, "Having the courage to be yourself, being true to your heart, is the essence of morality for Cavell and Emerson." Yet David Hume wrote that his search for himself reminded him of peeling an onion: He found perceptions, memories, and everything else, but nothing that he could call "himself." If Hume would have trouble following Emerson's prescription for morality, it would at least in part be the difference in the kind of inquiry the two thinkers engaged in. As Gilman says,

Most of us lack [Emerson's] conviction that if the truth-seeker continues to report his impressions as they really are he need not worry about the proportion or congruency of the aggregate. But perhaps we are shackled by our theories of knowledge. Emerson's epistemology was not that of the scientist or philosopher; it was that of the poet and prophet. "The faith," he wrote, "is the evidence."<sup>3</sup>

If so, it is a kind of evidence difficult to present in a moral argument.

Given these notes of caution, I think that what Emerson and Cavell offer is compelling. I want to see how much support I can find for the suggested relation between morality and authenticity. Courage to be ourselves, to be true to our heart, would have to be an essential ingredient in understanding the lives and experiences of ourselves and others. Stephen Mulhall argues effectively that in Cavell's moral perfectionism,

what is here at stake is whether an individual can be said to have her own experience, to have a life to lead, and so whether she can have a genuine or authentic self...these issues must be determined before questions of the self's duties to others can intelligibly be raised; after all, if a moral agent must (in Kantian terms) live in accordance with a self-originating and self-given law, she must first have a self from which that law can emerge and to which it can apply.<sup>4</sup>

This allows us insight into two important distinctions: first, between the tasks of moral philosophy and moral education; and second, between a kind of moral education that follows the footsteps, in simplified form, of the ratiocination of moral philosophy, and a kind of moral education that Emerson and Cavell are right, I think, to say is the essence of the responsibility we have. The first distinction is between those people for whom the moral nature of humanity is a given — who, as Bernard Williams puts it, very much want to be moral and just need to know what that requires — and those who, as character educators, need to show not the details of how to do it but, more fundamentally, that something called morality exists for everyone, and awareness of that is fundamental to any kind of good life. All the ratiocination in the world will not help here; just as Naoko Saito says, “abstract and sloganistic moral language used in the debate as well as in the classroom does not touch the child’s heart.”

So what will? Emerson and Cavell tell us that “Without sinking roots within ourselves, without feeling the weight of our own lives... we will be unable to recover the sense of the preciousness of the lives of others,” which, while certainly true, can be a lot to ask of a young person. How can someone in their early teens be helped to feel the weight of her own life? Some representation, some illumination of what the heart can feel would be valuable, and the relationship of art, the imagination, and moral education I discussed in this forum last year is one possibility. There are others, and Emerson’s and Cavell’s thoughtful and urgent message is one more reason to find them.

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1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 17.
  2. William H. Gilman, *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Signet, 1965), xvii.
  3. *Ibid.*, xxi.
  4. Stephen Mulhall, *The Cavell Reader* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), 353-54.