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Humanism and Ethos in the Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson

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Abstract

The article deals with the ideas of humanity and morality as reflected in the works of R. W. Emerson, the main representative of an intellectual movement called American transcendentalism. It conveys basic facts about the movement and focuses on the key aspects of Emerson's transcendental philosophy, particularly his concept of the Over-soul and his concept of Nature, which gave his humanistic philosophy a religious and moral accent. Due to it, Emerson's religious humanism also became the basis of American democratic individualism. The article offers insight into Emerson's ideas on morality and ethical behaviour, which challenge us to live in harmony with God and nature.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the first man of an American intellectual movement of the first half of the 19th-century known as transcendentalism, is the author of a large number of noteworthy essays with a strong accent on morality and ethical behaviour which were aimed at reform of the society of the time but can certainly also be inspirational for us in the present day. The powerful moral message that they communicate makes them eternal – valid for people all over the world regardless of their cultural background or religion. Despite the almost two centuries that separate us from the period they originated in, they have an extraordinary power to touch the hearts of readers and therefore should not be passed unnoticed. Due to these ideas which are still alive and vital, Emerson's works are definitely worth exploring.

The movement he represents is generally recognised as a milestone in American literary and intellectual history. It was a philosophical, social, spiritual and literary movement, which, from the point of view of the development of an independent American society, its young democracy, its culture, thought and literature, goes far beyond its period, which is historically relatively short, limited by the years 1836–1860. In American history this time is usually termed as one of “cultural independence” or the full liberation from a subordinate relationship to Europe – liberation in all areas of social development – not only in politics but also in art,

literature and attitude to traditional values. The uniqueness of this new direction in its approach to religion and culture lies in the whole complex of the then completely new and non-traditional philosophical, spiritual, ethical and aesthetic postulates which had a far-reaching effect not only on thinking in Emerson's time but also on the thought of the following century, as it is a well-known fact that a considerable number of 20th-century philosophers, literary men and campaigners for human rights were inspired by its message. Professor Philip Gura expresses his view that transcendentalism "was another in a long line of attempts to redirect the still incomplete American democratic experiment, in this case by anchoring it in the sanctity of each individual's heart" (Gura, 2008, p. 2).

Emerson, a remarkable philosopher, essayist, literary critic, romantic poet and a brilliant charismatic speaker with an extraordinary gift to electrify crowds and influence their thought, was a pioneer of this first distinctly American attempt to revive the cultural life of the new nation. Transcendentalists adopted his philosophy which absorbed and combined the features of a large number of European as well as Eastern philosophical systems, among them idealistic philosophies of ancient Greek philosophers, particularly Plato, and those of the German idealists, mainly represented by Kant, whose philosophy was unquestionably one of cardinal importance to him. He openly declares his bond with the above-mentioned philosophies throughout his essays, especially one on transcendentalism, known as "The Transcendentalist", where, at its very beginning, he alludes to them in the following explanation: "What is popularly called transcendentalism among us, is Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842" (Emerson, 2000a, p. 81). He then proclaims that the ideas reckoned as new by most of his contemporaries are, in fact, "the oldest of thoughts cast into the mould of these new times" (Emerson, 2000a, p. 81). What Emerson stresses is the belief that even though the fundamental truths of the universe are beyond our sensory knowledge, this does not mean that they are hidden from us and cannot be understood: exactly the opposite. Although true knowledge is not derived from sense-perception, it is accessible to anyone, since it is a matter of our spirit – in Emerson's terminology, a matter of our intuition. Intuition is the key principle of Emerson's philosophy. Intuitive knowledge is like the teaching of our own soul, which enables us to get to know spiritual principles of our own existence and leads us towards understanding God directly, without any assistance from sacred books or religious institutions. Despite this, Robert Richardson, the author of Emerson's intellectual biography, claims that "Emerson considered himself to have accepted the truth of Christianity. Where he differed," he continues, "was in his conviction that Christianity was founded on human nature, not on the Bible" (Richardson, 1995, p. 292). To justify this argument Richardson quotes Emerson's utterance: "They call it Christianity. I call it consciousness" (Richardson, 1995, p. 292).

The man who influenced Emerson in his view that it is from intuitions of the mind that we acquire true knowledge was, as we have already suggested, Immanuel Kant, who pointed to the existence of a special group of ideas which we are born with, which form our perception and therefore are termed intuitive or transcendental forms. Due to the term "transcendental", Kant plays a greater role in Emerson's eclecticism than other philosophers. Although the word as Emerson uses it does not apply precisely to the same philosophical phenomenon as it appears in Kant's philosophy, it will forever demonstrate the alliance of American transcendentalism with Kant's idealism. As Emerson formulates it: "The extraordinary profoundness and precision of that man's thinking have given vogue to his nomenclature, in Europe and America, to that extent that whatever belongs to the class of intuitive thought is popularly called at the present day Transcendental" (Emerson, 2000a, p. 86). Emerson terms intuition "the Unknown Centre" of man (Emerson 2000a, p. 83) and maintains that it is highly subjective, by nature good, beautiful, pure and perfect, as it is the Spirit of the Universe itself that resides inside it and that it forms a union with. This belief in the unity of the Universal

Spirit with the spirit of man is another of Emerson's doctrines which is of vital importance to him. Universal Spirit that penetrates all living things, the Spirit of this world overlapping all creation in its total perfection and splendour is the essence of all existing things and Emerson names it "The Over-Soul". It is the principle by which his philosophy acquires the philosophical form of monism. If it has been said that intuition in Emerson's teaching represented the highest faculty of the human soul, it should also be added that if the human soul participates in the Universal Soul, if it is part of the perfect Universe, part of God's perfection, then its faculties are divine ones and intuition obtains qualities which we can rely on with full certainty. This view became the source of Emerson's enormous confidence in one's self, in one's unique capabilities, in one's originality and inexhaustible source of energy that springs from the depths of the human soul, from one's deepest subjective self, which is part of God himself. This doctrine, which is displayed in a number of his essays, considerably strengthened American belief in individualism as the way of reaching true democratic ideals. As Richardson puts it, quoting Emerson's view that "the highest revelation is that God is in every man" (Richardson, 1995, p. 52): "This idea which is the central truth of religious – not secular – humanism is also the foundation of democratic individualism" (Richardson, 1995, p. 52).

The full realisation of the fact that God's spirit penetrates each human soul, which gave rise to Emerson's confidence in God's presence within each person, filled him with optimism typical for the whole of his teaching as well as inexhaustible enthusiasm which constantly propelled him forward towards further improvement in the knowledge which begins and ends with self-knowledge as a guarantor of trust in one's self. It may seem that the doctrine of self-trust, and subsequently of self-reliance, is a more modern variant of Socrates's command "know thyself" which he understood as a privileged way of cultivating one's own soul. Emerson's self, however, sounded even stronger because it was supported by the belief that every individual's heart is God's residence, part of the omnipresent Universal Soul. As he puts it in another part of his essay "The Transcendentalist": "Let the soul be erect and all things will go well" (Emerson, 2000a, p. 83). And it is just intuition, rather than rational or sensory knowledge, that, in his teaching, becomes the means for a conscious union of these two kinds of spiritual essence. In the essay entitled "The Spiritual Laws" he, for example, encourages his readers to develop their talents not only because "the talent is the call" open to anyone, but mainly because it always depends on the "mode in which the general soul incarnates itself in him" (Emerson, 2000b, p. 176). In accordance with the Over-soul doctrine Emerson develops his monistic philosophy in order to teach his contemporaries, and without doubt also us, his present-day readers, the basic principles of religious humanism, as he does, for instance, in the following passage, putting emphasis on belief and love as the main criteria of peaceful existence, which intuitively direct us towards the recognition of God within us: "A little consideration of what takes place around us every day would show us that a higher law than that of our will regulates events; that our painful labors are unnecessary and fruitless; that only in our easy, simple, spontaneous action are we strong, and by contenting ourselves with obedience we become divine. Belief and love – a believing love will relieve us of a vast load of care. O my brothers, God exists" (Emerson, 2000b, p. 176).

Transcendentalism, which in its attempt to revive democracy bet on the morality of each individual, appealing to the sanctity of one's heart and thus the expected moral integrity of one's character, put, in fact, into practice Kant's categorical moral imperative and hoped that ethical reform would lead the country to its perfection. It was Emerson's deliberate intention to constantly stress the importance of relying on one's consciousness and faith so as to live morally. As he has it in The Spiritual Laws: "The whole course of things goes to teach us faith. We need only obey. There is guidance for each of us, and by lowly listening we shall hear the right word" (Emerson, 2000b, p. 176). If we still have not mentioned that Emerson

was a former Unitarian pastor, this is the right moment to emphasise the fact, as his diction reflects his religious experience and is strikingly connected with the Bible. With the typical fervour of his speech and characteristic metaphorical language he gives us advice on what to do to live harmoniously: “Place yourself in the middle of the stream of power and wisdom which animates all whom it floats, and you are without effort impelled to truth, to right and a perfect contentment” (Emerson, 2000b, p. 176). Emerson concludes, expressing full confidence in one’s capabilities: “Then you are the world, the measure of right, of truth, of beauty” (Emerson, 2000b, p. 176). There are thousands of examples which Emerson makes use of to encourage people to trust themselves and thus humanise the whole of society, even though at the time he lived in he certainly could not have realised their universal validity for the whole of mankind. His belief that a man is able to accomplish whatever he wishes is expressed in the following lines: “What a man does, that he does. What has he to do with hope or fear? In himself is his might” (Emerson, 2000b, p. 178). Then he adds, with his typical optimistic trust in the powers of the soul: “What your heart thinks great, is great. The soul’s emphasis is always right” (Emerson, 2000b, p. 179). He also reassures us that happiness with what we have and who we are, is a guarantee of self-satisfaction. “A good man is contented” (Emerson, 2000b, p. 187), he claims with all the wisdom of a modest man. Emerson’s philosophy, however, has one more significant dimension that we have not discussed yet. It is his philosophy of nature, which is strongly tied with other philosophical principles, particularly the Over-soul. In his essay “The Transcendentalist” Emerson proclaims: “If there is anything grand and daring in human thought or virtue, any reliance on the vast, the unknown; any presentiment, any extravagance of faith, the spiritualist adopts it as most in nature” (Emerson, 2000a, p. 85). Nature is, in Emerson’s teaching, the reflection of the Universal Spirit, it is part of his Over-soul. Nature and the Over-soul are quite intimately interconnected – the latter animates the former, which means that nature is given the qualities of the Spirit and becomes a temple of the living God. Consequently, whenever Emerson speaks about nature in this sense, he capitalises the word and Nature is referred to as “she”. Living nature is God himself. That is why getting to know nature is the way to understand God. As he formulates it in a metaphorical way in his first essay entitled “Nature”: “Nature always wears the colors of spirit” (Emerson, 2000c, p. 7). The spirit penetrates all creation and for this reason it inhabits both the human soul and nature. In Emerson’s view, nature is a miracle available to anyone at any hour of their life to contemplate God, who, via it, reveals himself. His philosophy of nature is thus directed towards man to make him see the miraculous in the common and in doing so to make him feel that he is “a part or parcel of God” (Emerson, 2000c, p. 6). Moreover, the concept of nature understood in this way enabled him to reply to the British philosopher Hume on his scepticism, which was the result of his denial of the philosophical concepts of cause and effect. Emerson grandly declares that Nature is God’s child, that it is the visible effect of his might, when he, using poetic language, says: “Through all its kingdoms, to the suburbs and outskirts of things, it is faithful to the cause whence it had its origin. It always speaks of Spirit. It suggests the absolute. It is a perpetual effect. It is a great shadow pointing always to the sun behind us” (Emerson, 2000c, p. 31). The idea that nature is penetrated by God’s spirit and, as such, is the emanation of God, was not new in 19th-century philosophy. Emerson himself came into contact with it via the English romantic poets, particularly Wordsworth, whose pantheism profoundly influenced him, and even though Emerson was not a true pantheist, he strongly believed that “visible nature must have a spiritual and moral side” (Emerson, 2000c, p. 18). Since the Universal Spirit represents the highest beauty, wisdom, truth and goodness, nature possesses the same qualities. Thus, reflecting divinity, nature also provides moral guidance, as Emerson puts it in the following statement: “The moral law lies at the centre of nature and radiates to the circumference” (Emerson, 2000c, p. 21).

Emerson strongly emphasised the role of moral sentiment, which gives us a sense of what is good and what is not, and leads us to favour certain values more than others. It was particularly due to the influence of Kant's moral philosophy from his *Critique of Practical Reason*, that Emerson valued the sense of ethical thinking and preferred such a view of the world in which the key role belongs to ethical conduct, not to the epistemological or metaphysical. Ethical thinking and behaviour is one of the most significant principles of his philosophy. In his foundational essay on the balance of nature entitled "Compensation", in accordance with the idea of the universe as a whole, no part of which can be changed without affection of other parts, he encourages us to give love, as it is fundamental for obtaining love from others. It sounds like an urgent request when he says: "Love, and you shall be loved" (Emerson, 2000d, p. 166). Moreover, he teaches us, using the rhetoric of a priest, to love each other unconditionally: "I am my brother and my brother is me" (Emerson, 2000d, p. 169). Also, he proposes that even "if I feel over-shadowed and outdone by great neighbours, I can yet love" (Emerson, 2000d, p. 169), which sounds like a piece of practical advice on how to maintain harmonious relationships with people around us, but, in fact, is quite a serious alternation of the biblical "love your enemy", which is one of God's highest commands. At another point in this essay he urges us to be generous: "Give, and it shall be given you" (Emerson, 2000d, p. 162), which clearly reminds us of another biblical instruction.

In the statement from his well-known essay entitled "Divinity School Address" Emerson looks at the beauty of human virtue. If one is able to open one's heart and mind to it, one begins to perceive oneself properly, as part of the Universe, as part of the highest goodness. Therefore, a man should realise that even if he is imperfect and weak, he is born for the good. "A more secret, sweet, and overpowering beauty appears to man when his heart and mind open to the sentiment of virtue. Then he is instructed in what is above him. He learns that his being is without bound; that to the good, to the perfect, he is born, low as he now lies in evil and weakness" (Emerson, 2000e, p. 64). In "The Spiritual Laws" he calls: "Visit your friend. Visit him now. Let him feel that the highest love has come to see him, in thee its lowest organ" (Emerson, 2000b, p. 186). This sounds like a lesson on morality through which he tends to manifest what faith looks like in practice. When he instructs us on ethical conduct, it is always religious morality that is the centre of his attention. Many of his essays epitomise the real school of correct values and proper attitudes to life, which he personally believed were the most appropriate. He obviously put all his creativity into the service of improvement of human behaviour. In fact, the topics he deals with in his essays are all related to the fundamental principles of religious morality. It is important to say that ethos, which we feel when reading them, always has to do with morality based on God's laws – on religion, not ethics. He offers a coherent explanation of this, for him, substantial difference in his first essay, where he claims: "Ethics and religion differ herein; that the one is the system of human duties commencing from man; the other from God. Religion includes the personality of God; ethics does not" (Emerson 2000c, p. 30). Due to the fact that Nature is an outward sign of God and God is the highest moral law, living nature and all its creation in its unique beauty, the beauty of little things, reflects God's laws – the laws which determine what is right and wrong, the laws of the Ten Commandments. This fact is made obvious in many parts of his essays. The following example is from Nature: "All things are moral; and in their boundless changes have an unceasing reference to spiritual nature. Therefore is nature glorious with form, color, and motion; that every globe in the remotest heaven, every chemical change from the rudest crystal up to the laws of life, every change of vegetation from the first principle of growth in the eye of a leaf, to the tropical forest and antediluvian coal-mine, every animal function from the sponge up to Hercules, hall hint or thunder to man the laws of right and wrong, and echo the Ten Commandments. Therefore is Nature ever the ally of Religion: lends all her pomp and riches to the religious sentiment" (Emerson, 2000c, p. 21).

When Emerson speaks about the basic values such as truth or love as the principles which one realises in one's soul precisely because it is part of a Universal Soul possessing all of these attributes, it is, as if he explained to his readers that this is the right way of life: "Man is conscious of a universal soul within or behind his individual life, wherein, as in a firmament, the natures of Justice, Truth, Love, Freedom arise and shine" (Emerson, 2000c, p. 14). Another example that demonstrates the importance he attaches to religious morality is one in which he emphasises that if we want to live the principles of goodness, we necessarily have to live in harmony with nature, since it is nature which helps us understand God and his laws. The logic behind this statement goes like this: if living nature is an outer garment of God and if God is the highest good, truth and virtue, then life in harmony with nature means life in accordance with the principles of God himself. As Emerson puts it: "A life in harmony with Nature, the love of truth and of virtue, will purge the eyes to understand her text" (Emerson, 2000c, p. 18). At another point in his first essay he gives his readers advice on how to be filled with happiness, which he discovers in worshipping nature. He who worships nature, worships God. If a man feels awe and respect for nature, it is as if he were taught to act in the same way in his relationship with God. If he perceives the whole beauty of God's creation in admiration and humility, he, in fact, contemplates God. Emerson expresses this idea in the subsequent statement: "The happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship" (Emerson, 2000c, p. 32).

In his essay entitled "Heroism" he teaches his readers how to build up their sense of self-esteem, stressing the principles of proper attitudes to life. In Emerson's view, self-confidence is not egotism if it resides in God's creeds, which are reflected in our souls. From the perspective of his personal viewpoint, self-trust based on justice, generosity and modesty is heroic. As he puts it in the above-mentioned essay: "Self-trust is the essence of heroism. It speaks the truth and it is just, generous, hospitable, temperate, scornful of petty calculations and scornful of being scorned" (Emerson, 2000f, p. 229). He also claims that life in modesty and justice, awareness of virtue as the merit of truth as well as grandeur of man, are noble ideals that are worth living. In his effort to convince us of his truth he claims that he who lives in compliance with them shows real heroism: "The heroic soul does not sell its justice and its nobleness. It does not ask to dine nicely and to sleep warm. The essence of greatness is the perception that virtue is enough. Poverty is its ornament. It does not need plenty, and can very well abide its loss" (Emerson, 2000f, p. 231). In another essay with a strong ethical aspect entitled "Friendship" he offers guidance on how not to be lonely and abandoned. The next statement sounds like an axiom which can, under no circumstances, be denied: "The only reward of virtue is virtue; the only way to have a friend is to be one" (Emerson, 2000g, p. 211). In the passage that follows Emerson again clarifies the ideal of responsible moral behaviour. He highlights the fact that he who desires to become a respectable person, must necessarily be the embodiment of the moral order based on justice and truth: "We can drive a stone upward for a moment into the air, but it is yet true that all stones will forever fall; and whatever instances can be quoted of unpunished theft, or of a lie which somebody credited, justice must prevail, and it is the privilege of truth to make itself believed. Character is this moral order seen through the medium of an individual nature" (Emerson, 2000h, p. 330). The last example chosen to demonstrate Emerson's ideas on moral conduct is a metaphorical expression in which, in accordance with the philosophy of the Over-soul, he speaks about a man as a dwelling of God's wisdom and goodness, thus putting an emphasis on their intimate interconnection. Using a metaphor of a man as the facade of a temple he explains the participation of a human soul in the Over-soul, which possesses all the qualities of divine perfection that flow into the soul of a person: "A man is the facade of a temple wherein all wisdom and all good abide" (Emerson, 2000h, p. 330).

It may seem from the above quotations that Emerson is an extremely repetitive author. The repetition, however, is intentional. It is a teaching strategy. All he aims at is to make us realise that moral law, which is God himself, dwells in the heart of each of us – the doctrine that, as we have already pointed out, became the starting-point of American belief in individualism. This is of fundamental importance for Emerson – the man who lived his ideals and was absolutely convinced of their relevance. That is why he undoubtedly deserves our attention. Although during the time in which he lived many of his contemporaries were not fully convinced of any real value of his ideas, at present, at the beginning of the 21st century, in the postmodern era marked by consumerism, loose morals, loss of self-confidence, faith in humanity, belief in God as well as the complete collapse of the value system, they appear to be highly topical, wise and almost alarmingly timeless and multinational. Even though culturally and religiously remote from us, the spiritual and natural principles proclaimed in Emerson's works can still be a challenge for each of us to experience life meaningfully and in harmony with our inner self, with God as well as nature.

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