

WHY EMERSON?

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ABSTRACT: This paper is an attempt to explore the pragmatic core of Emerson's thought. While this core was evident to such thinkers as William James and John Dewey, it is routinely missed by those who read Emerson as a religious figure or as an idealist. Recovering Emerson's pragmatic core will enable us to recognize his ongoing value. By emphasizing especially "The Divinity School Address," I hope to show the power of Emerson's pragmatic side.

Keywords: Emerson, pragmatism, religion, Soul, Unitarianism

My title for this essay comes from John J. McDermott (1932–2018) who introduced me to Emerson as a philosophical thinker. McDermott once contemplated titling an essay that he was preparing on the importance of Emerson: "Why Emerson?"; but he later decided that, rather than using the question form, he would simply present the influence of Emerson on later American philosophers to demonstrate why he mattered. For McDermott himself, "[t]he central theme of Emerson's life and work is that of possibility." This theme was grounded in two aspects of his thought: (1) Emerson's "extraordinary confidence in the latent powers of the individual soul when related to the symbolic riches of nature," and (2) Emerson's "belief that the comparatively unarticulated history of American experience could act as a vast resource for the energizing of novel and creative spiritual energy."¹ My focus will be different from, although I believe compatible with, McDermott's; and I have reverted to his original title because I believe that his original question still needs to be asked.

Ralph Waldo Emerson has long held a secure, if modest, place in familiar histories of American philosophy.² He

was, as we all know, the driving force behind American Transcendentalism which, with pragmatism, has proven to be one of America's two main philosophical traditions. Attempts to characterize this philosophical movement have been varied; but the majority of approaches would seem to agree that, in Emerson's hands, Transcendentalism represents an amalgam of aspects of at least the following: idealism, pantheism, mysticism, Platonism, Swedenborgianism, and Buddhism. In less rarefied terms, Transcendentalism is often represented as a romantic response to the growing materialism of American society. But what if Transcendentalism, freed from its accidental nineteenth century setting, is not a philosophical tradition that should be seen as an alternative to pragmatism at all? Moreover, what if much of the romanticism of Transcendentalism, that has appealed traditionally to writers and thinkers because of its intellectual intricacy and sheer beauty, is better seen as a distraction from the pragmatic core of Emerson's message: appreciating the sacredness of experience?

Emerson at times emphasizes the romanticism of his perspective.³ In the essay "The Transcendentalist," for example, he maintains that Transcendentalism is a variant of idealism. "What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us," he notes, "is Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842" (193).⁴ He then surveys the history of "[t]his way of thinking" in a series of historical situations. "[F]alling on Roman times," he writes, idealism "made Stoic philosophers." He continues that "falling on superstitious times, [idealism] made prophets and apostles; on popish times, made protestants and ascetic monks, preachers of Faith against the preachers of Works."

(2/e 1923); Harvey Gates Townsend, *Philosophical Ideas in the United States* (1934); Herbert Wallace Schneider, *A History of American Philosophy* (2/e, 1963); William H. Werkmeister, *A History of Philosophical Ideas in America* (1949); Frederick Meyer, *A History of American Thought: An Introduction* (1951); Joseph Leon Blau, *Men and Movements in American Philosophy* (1952); Elizabeth Flower and Murray G. Murphey, *A History of Philosophy in America* (1977), two volumes; and Cornell West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (1989).

³ Emerson's romanticism is particularly strong at places in such writings as: *Nature* (1834), "The Over-Soul" (1841), "Compensation" (1841), "Circles" (1841), and "The Transcendentalist" (1842).

⁴ All of my citations of Emerson will be to Emerson, R. W. 1983.

¹ McDermott J. J. 1980. 90–91.

² I have in mind such volumes as: Isaac Woodbridge Riley, *American Thought: From Puritanism to Pragmatism and Beyond*

Closer to his own day, Emerson notes that “on prelatical times, [idealism] made Puritans and Quakers; and falling on Unitarian and commercial times, [it] makes the peculiar shades of Idealism which we know” (198).

Emerson continues that “the Idealism of the present day acquired the name of Transcendental, from the use of that term by Immanuel Kant,” who rejected what he saw as “the skeptical philosophy” of John Locke that “insisted that there is nothing in the intellect which was not previously in the experience of the senses.” Kant’s rejoinder to Locke was to maintain, in Emerson’s words, that “there was a very important class of ideas, or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired; that these were intuitions of the mind itself; and he [Kant] denominated them *Transcendental forms*” (198). As we know, Emerson never mined Kant’s thought deeply for the fine points of his perspective, as many other philosophers have been wont to do. Rather, guided by the simplified reworkings of Kant at the hands of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and James Marsh,¹ Emerson drew from Kant’s work the central distinction between Reason and the Understanding, and used it to defend his belief in the superiority of spirit over matter.

Emerson writes that thinkers “have ever divided into two sects, Materialists and Idealists.” Members of the former class approach their experience as “the data of the senses”; the members the latter class emphasize consciousness and maintain that “the senses are not final.” While the senses offer us “representations of things,” they cannot tell us what “the things themselves” are. Hinting at his own position, Emerson indicates that “the materialist insists on facts, on history, on the force of circumstances, and the animal wants of man,” whereas the idealist, who looks for the spiritual aspects of our experience, insists on “the power of Thought and of Will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture.” While no idealist would deny “the presence of this table, this

chair, and the walls of this room,” he continues, the idealist “looks at these things as the reverse side of the tapestry, as the *other end*, each being the sequel or completion of a spiritual fact which nearly concerns him.” In this way, the idealist “transfers every object in nature from an independent and anomalous position without there, into the consciousness” (193–194). Materialists, on the contrary, living in a solid world “of sensation,” reject the “fine-spun theories” of what they see as the idealistic “star-gazers and dreamers.” At the same time, Emerson insists that no materialist can justify the belief that “uniform experience will continue uniform, or on what grounds he founds his faith in his figures, and he will perceive that his mental fabric is built up on just as strange and quaking foundations as his proud edifice of stone” (194–195).

For Emerson, the great mistake of the materialist is to focus exclusively upon “the external world,” and to see our human existence “as one product of that.” For the idealist, on the contrary, the inner world of consciousness is the source of our true life, and the outer world is ultimately “appearance.” While the materialist focuses on the externals of our social life and politics, and on the materials that support our mortal existence, the idealist uses a “metaphysical” standard, “namely, the *rank* which things themselves take in his consciousness,” whether higher and lower. “Mind is the only reality, of which men and all other natures are better or worse reflectors,” Emerson writes. “Nature, literature, history, are only subjective phenomena.” As a consequence, the idealist “does not respect labor, or the products of labor, namely, property, otherwise than as a manifold symbol, illustrating with wonderful fidelity of details the laws of being.” Similarly, the idealist has no respect for the government, the church, charities, or the arts “for themselves.” The experience of the idealist means that “the procession of facts” that we call “the world” in fact flows “perpetually outward from an invisible, unsounded centre in himself,” and requires that we “regard all things as having a subjective or relative existence, relative to that aforesaid Unknown Centre of him” (195). I

¹ See especially Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection* (1825), and James Marsh, “Preliminary Essay” (1829) to the same volume.

would suggest, however, that “The Transcendentalist,” with its concentration on the negative aspects of materialism rather than on the fullness of experience, is atypical for Emerson, and to focus too closely on the romantic aspects of Emerson’s thought will minimize his pragmatism.

Emerson’s position is not always this extreme. More typically, he writes in *Nature* that spiritual truths far outweigh the importance of the facts of the material world. “Idealism is a hypothesis to account for nature by other principles than those of carpentry or chemistry” (41). Our ideas are the key. For Emerson, “[a]s objects of science” these ideas “are accessible to few men” at present; but he reminds us that “all men are capable of being raised by piety or by passion, into their region.” The challenge that we all face is to approach these ideas via Reason rather than the Understanding. If we can realize the full possibilities of our ideas in this way, we can transcend the everyday world of mere facts without rejecting it as unreal. As Emerson continues, “no man touches these divine natures, without becoming, in some degree, himself divine.” With this new spark of divinity, “we learn the difference between the absolute and the conditional or relative.” In apprehending the absolute, we become fully alive. “We become immortal, for we learn that time and space are relations of matter; that, with a perception of truth, or a virtuous will, they have no affinity” (37–38). While this discussion is not as strongly romantic as Emerson’s position in “The Transcendentalist,” still it seems to be at a distance from his pragmatism.

II

Given Emerson’s general formulation of Transcendentalism, what is its role in the history of American philosophy that – regardless of its diversity – is pragmatic at its core? And what role does Emerson play in any attempt to connect up early pragmatist pioneers like Benjamin Franklin with the central figures of its maturity like William James and John Dewey? I am interested here less in

considering what Emerson usually means to us now, when he is so often typecast as a Transcendentalist icon, and more in exploring what Emerson might mean to us if we could recover a more historically contextualized understanding of his thought. One way to approach that broader evaluation might be to consider his work in the company of such other figures as Henry David Thoreau, Sarah Margaret Fuller, and Walt Whitman. (I will leave this comparative path for a later time.) Another way to achieve a fuller recognition of Emerson’s place in the American tradition would be to consider what he meant at the time of his death in 1882, or of the centennial of his birth in 1903, when he was still widely considered to be America’s sage.

Emerson, as we know, played a role in American thought from the 1830s onward; and, through his lectures and essays, he attained a role as public moralist. His was a voice for pragmatism, for the power of ideas, especially the idea of the primacy of living experience over the dead hand of inherited doctrines. In his context, for example, Emerson challenged religious scriptures of whatever sort that pretended to have final answers and called on us to recognize the direct divine messages that appear within. He was also a proponent of the spirit of meliorism – not of optimism, but of making the most of our situation in a world where false hope of ultimate success draws us ever beyond the horizon. And, above all, Emerson was an experimentalist who did not pretend “to settle any thing as true or false.” Nothing inherited was to him decided or closed to further experience. “I simply experiment,” he writes, he is “an endless seeker with no Past at my back” (412). To get an initial sense of this pragmatic Emerson, we can turn to two evaluations that considered him as a central figure of the American philosophical tradition. These readings of Emerson were offered in 1903 by William James and John Dewey. (James was 40-years old in 1882 and 61-years old in 1903; Dewey was 23-years old and 44-years old respectively.)

In preparation for a brief address at a centenary ceremony in Concord, James returned to reread Emerson’s collected works; and the address that he gave contains a

statement of his own partly secularized Transcendentalist appreciation of experience. James notes that, for Emerson, “the effulgence of the Universal Reason” was present in “the individual fact,” and that the “Cosmic Intellect” is to be found “in mortal men and passing hours.” James continues that, for Emerson, every individual is “an angle of its eternal vision, and the only way to be true to our Maker is to be loyal to ourselves.” Because of our connection to this Cosmic Intellect, “there is something in each and all of us, even the lowliest, that ought not to consent to borrowing traditions and living at second hand.” Further, James notes that “[t]his faith that in a life at first hand there is something sacred is perhaps the most characteristic note in Emerson’s writings.” His more explicitly pragmatic appreciation of Emerson emphasizes the centrality of Emerson’s “non-conformist persuasion”: his belief that, because “[t]he world is still new and untried,” we must all find our own way. “In seeing freshly, and not in hearing of what others saw, shall a man find what truth is.”¹ He continues that Emerson’s proclamation of “the sovereignty of the living individual” – “The present man is the aboriginal reality, the Institution is derivative” – explained his powerful effect on his audience and would continue to be recognized as “the soul of his message.”² His “revelation” is of the power of the individual, the particular, the novel, the personal. “The point of any pen can be an epitome of reality,” James writes, “the commonest person’s act, if genuinely actuated, can lay hold on eternity.”³

¹ James, W. 1903, 111.

² James, W. 1903, 112.

³ James, W. 1903, 115.

James also writes to his brother Henry at the time of Emerson’s pragmatic effect on him: “The reading of the divine Emerson, volume after volume, has done me a lot of good, and, strange to say has thrown a strong practical light on my own path. The incorruptible way in which he followed his own vocation, of seeing such truths as the Universal Soul vouchsafed to him from day to day and month to month, and reporting them in the right literary form, and thereafter kept his limits absolutely, refusing to be entangled with irrelevancies however urging and tempting, knowing both his strength and its limits, and clinging unchangeably to the rural environment which he once for all found to be most propitious, seems to me a moral lesson to all men who have any genius, however small, to foster” (James, W.

To consider a second pragmatic voice, we can turn to John Dewey’s fully secularized evaluation of Emerson from that same year. Dewey writes that “reflective thinkers” have a tendency to slip into a world of ideas, and often have mistakenly “taken the way to truth for their truth; the method of life for the conduct of life – in short, have taken means for end.”⁴ He believes, however, that Emerson refocuses our inquiries away from “the distinctions and classifications which to most philosophers are true in and of and because of their systems,” and towards “the common experience of the everyday man.” In this way, Dewey sees the pragmatic Emerson urging “the reduction of all the philosophers of the race... to the test of trial by the service rendered the present and immediate experience.”⁵ Emerson thus, for Dewey, stands “[a]gainst creed and system, convention and institution,” and “for restoring to the common man that which in the name of religion, of philosophy, of art and of morality, has been embezzled from the common store and appropriated to sectarian and class use.” Dewey confesses that Emerson was his primary guide to recognizing such professional malfeasance, and he condemns “how such malversation makes truth decline from its simplicity, and in becoming partial and owned, become a puzzle of and trick for theologian, metaphysician and litterateur.”⁶ Rendering this pragmatic point more poetically, Dewey concludes that “[f]or thousands of earth’s children, Emerson has taken away the barriers that shut out the sun and has secured the unimpeded, cheerful circulation of the light of heaven, and the wholesome air of day.”⁷

More recent commentators have similarly found value in a pragmatic reading of Emerson’s ideas. Joseph Leon Blau, for example, considers Emerson to be a “self-consecrated thinker” who put his ideas to work “for the American people”; and he maintains that any attempt “[t]o measure the full impact of Emerson’s philosophic

1992–2004, 3: 234).

⁴ Dewey, J. 1903, 186.

⁵ Dewey, J. 1903, 188–189.

⁶ Dewey, J. 1903, 190.

⁷ Dewey, J. 1903, 191.

imagination, to determine all the outcomes of his work," would require that we "write the history of American culture since his time."¹ In particular, in the face of the familiar readings of Emerson as an individualist, Blau stresses Emerson's view that "the human being is a social being," and that "without rooting in society any person is lost." Thus Emerson requires, Blau continues, that we combine "the sense of individuality and the sense of common humanity," a combination of "uniqueness" and "human solidarity" into a "thoroughgoing humanism." As Blau concludes, the antidote for our "egoistic, false individualism is... culture, education."² Robert Channon Pollock offers another pragmatic reading of Emerson. For Pollock, Emerson is a thinker who approaches idealism not as a comprehensive doctrine but as a weapon to counter "the complacency of the materialist."³ Thus Pollock sees no need for Emerson to articulate a fully functioning idealistic theory. Other pragmatic themes that Pollock emphasizes in Emerson are the latter's assertion that God speaks to us even now if we place ourselves "firmly in the present" with a faith "in the human soul itself through which God makes Himself heard"⁴; and Emerson's call for us to free ourselves from "a deadly fixation on the past."⁵ Like Blau, Pollock also stresses that for Emerson an authentic individual is not "a spiritually self-sufficient entity... devoid of all ties to the universe," but rather a person among persons "bound together by common roots which run underground."⁶

Sadly, in our day Emerson is too often stripped of his pragmatic core. Sometimes he is offered as a romantic decoration to the education of unprepared high school students; sometimes he is offered as the idealistic background to the theorizing of settled academics. Otherwise, however, Emerson is generally neglected, even when he could help us to recognize outdated intellectual

fashions of the sort that we too often simplify into calcified approaches to questions of race, gender, and class. Similarly, Emerson could also help us to recognize the disastrous level of our crippling attachments to the fancy and the virtual, and to return to the simple and the present. Such a pragmatic Emerson could also reinforce in our work the fact that scholarship need not be an arena of arcane facts, obscure research, and ephemeral answers; rather it could become again an intellectual inquiry that plays a vital role within the community by introducing students to the triumphs and problems of human existence. Too often, however, we inquire at second-hand and quickly are distracted from vital issues by the infinite supply of compelling scholarship: with mastering the literature of medical ethics, or surveying the theories of education, or comparing the dogmas of religions. Emerson, on the contrary, suggests that we engage with our intellectual traditions without being captured by them, that we never lose our focus on the problematic basis of our pragmatic experience in the world.

III

As an explicit example of Emerson's pragmatism, we can consider his religious approach to living, as exemplified primarily in "The Divinity School Address." Emerson, a high-profile Unitarian speaker, offered his address at Harvard's Unitarian Divinity School on 15 July 1838, at the seminary that he had attended intermittently only a few years earlier. He had, of course, left the pulpit of Boston's Second Church in 1832; but he continued to preach here-and-there until the end of the decade, when his thinking carried him from heresy to apostasy. The occasion of this address was a month before the graduation service for six young men who were about to enter the ministry. Also, in attendance were families and friends, members of the faculty and other students, perhaps 100 or so people in total. Emerson had been invited to deliver this address by a committee of students, not by the faculty to whom his talk turned out to

¹ Blau, J. L. 1952, 125, 130.

² Blau, J. L. 1977, 85, 83, 91.

³ Pollock, R. C. 1958, 23.

⁴ Pollock, R. C. 1958, 38.

⁵ Pollock, R. C. 1958, 37.

⁶ Pollock, R. C. 1958, 34.

be aggressively hostile. It amounted to an attack on Unitarianism at its educational headquarters, and it gave rise to a furor that resulted in his banishment from Harvard for decades.

Nineteen years before in Baltimore, when the great Unitarian divine, William Ellery Channing, offered as the ordination sermon for Jared Sparks the classic formulation of Unitarian faith, "Unitarian Christianity," he began with a straight-forward pragmatic text from Paul's first epistle to the Thessalonians: "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good."¹ Emerson at the Divinity School begins differently, with an almost pantheistic invocation of nature, a paean to the perfections of the everyday world. "In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life," he begins his celebration of experience. "The grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of flowers. The air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of pine, the balm-of-Gilead, and the new hay." In such a glorious world, "[n]ight brings no gloom to the heart with its welcome shade. Through the transparent darkness the stars pour their almost spiritual rays." Each of us who recognizes this magical shroud awaits the new day. "The cool night bathes the world as with a river," he says, "and prepares his eyes again for the crimson dawn" (75).

For Emerson, our world and we are also thoroughly moral. "The sentiment of virtue is a reverence and delight in the presence of certain divine laws." This sentiment recognizes "that this homely game of life we play, covers, under what seem foolish details, principles that astonish." All of us have learned through play and work "the action of light, motion, gravity, muscular force," and in the processes of living we have come to understand how "love, fear, justice, appetite, man, and God, interact." These divine laws of our natural existence, however, cannot be formulated in words; "[t]hey will not be written out on paper, or spoken by the tongue," and "[t]hey elude our persevering thought." In addition, these divine

laws cannot come to us through the Understanding. They can only be intuited. These laws are to be found, for example, "in each other's faces, in each other's actions, in our own remorse." Recognizing these divine laws, and developing them in our lives, makes us moral. "If a man is at heart just, then in so far he is God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God do enter into that man with justice." If, on the contrary, "a man dissemble, deceive, he deceives himself, and goes out of acquaintance with his own being" (76–77).

Emerson reminds the would-be ministers that we are instructed by our daily interactions. We delight in the apprehension of Divine laws in nature: we recognize the mind of God present in each ray of light, in each wave of water, and in each breath of life. For Emerson, "the world is not the product of manifold power, but of one will, of one mind"; and that mind is active everywhere in nature, "in each ray of the star, in each wavelet of the pool." Further, "whatever opposes that will, is everywhere balked and baffled, because things are made so, and not otherwise" (77–78). Emerson continues that, as we delight in appreciating the wondrous workings of divine nature, we realize that we must do so with our souls (Reason), not with our minds (the Understanding). If we can come to recognize "this law of laws," we will gain access to "the religious sentiment" that yields us "our highest happiness." The Understanding, on the contrary, may give us science and power; but it does not make the world "safe and habitable," nor yield the cherished "end or unity." With "the sentiment of virtue" in our hearts, however, we see "that Law is sovereign over all natures; and the worlds, time, space, eternity, do seem to break out into joy" (78).

Emerson's introduction represents his position on the idealistic ("Transcendental") nature of our existence. Of course, his address at the Divinity School was supposed to be a Unitarian sermon of sorts; and he soon turns to, for him, a more familiar – if perhaps, for the audience, a less welcome – theme: that Unitarianism has lost this sense of intuition, of mystery, and become cold and formulaic. The application of his sermon was that

¹ Channing, W. E. 1819, 367.

the young preachers assembled needed to forget nearly all the professional training that the faculty had given them. For Emerson, young preachers were too often distracted from their true vocation by academic worries about the proper forms of ceremonies and a concentration on correctly memorized prayers; too much effort had been expended focusing on texts and translations that purported to get closer to the literal meaning of Christ's words. The main result of all of this unfortunate misdirection was mechanical preaching.

For Emerson, there seemed to be no place in the Unitarian church for the mysteries of existence that captivated him. "The doctrine of inspiration is lost," he continues; "the base doctrine of the majority of voices, usurps the place of the doctrine of the soul." The vision of the church has been reduced to that of the Understanding, bereft of "[m]iracles, prophecy, poetry." The life of Reason, "the ideal life, the holy life," is now "ancient history merely." Reason has no living place "in the belief, nor in the aspiration of society"; and the people are so lost that they have forgotten how to look for something higher, or too often even have given up the search. "Whilst the doors of the temple stand open, night and day, before every man, and the oracles of this truth cease never," he notes, "it is guarded by one stern condition; this, namely; it is an intuition." This gospel, he continues, "cannot be received at second hand." As a pragmatic consequence, the members of the congregation do not need "instruction" in what to believe; they require only "provocation" to pursue their own truth (79).

Thus, Emerson confronts this graduating class of budding ministers with his evaluation of the situation of the Christian religion that they were intending to preach. Their church, he tells them, has fallen into two grave errors. The first is that, while Christ experienced the mysteries of our natural existence, the church would have them teach his words about these mysteries. "Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets," he tells them. "He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty, he lived in it, and had his being there." This is a spiritual

message, however, that can only be recognized on a plane higher than that of the church's familiar preaching. "There is no doctrine of the Reason," he continues, "which will bear to be taught by the Understanding." Too much concern is given to the person Christ – to "[t]he idioms of his language, and the figures of his rhetoric" – and too little to "his truth." As a result, our church is "not built on his principles, but on his tropes." Christ, Emerson notes further, "spoke of miracles; for he felt that man's life was a miracle, and all that the man doth, and he knew that this daily miracle shines, as the character ascends." But the church's sense of miracles "gives a false impression" that they are scarce. Moreover, the church has made Christ-the-person the focus in the formation of the ministry in its futile attempts "to communicate religion." Rather than a focus on "the doctrine of the soul," the church offers "an exaggeration of the personal, the positive, the ritual. It has dwelt, it dwells, with noxious exaggeration about the *person* of Jesus." Rather than teaching the history of Christ's mission, these young ministers should strive to help the members of their congregations to intuit the meaning of Christ's message. As Emerson notes, "[t]he soul knows no persons" (80–81).

For Emerson, the second grave error of the contemporary church is that it fails to explore the possible spiritual or religious meaning of our lives. It fails to recognize what our experiences can reveal to us. On the contrary, the church treats revelation as finished and done. As he continues, "the Moral Nature, that Law of laws, whose revelations introduce greatness, – yea, God himself, into the open soul, is not explored as the fountain of the established teaching in society." Because of this failure to appreciate our experience, we now view "revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead. The injury to faith throttles the preacher; and the goodliest of institutions becomes an uncertain and inarticulate voice" (82–83). Instead of being moments for mystery and spiritual expansion, our church services reduce us to boredom and regret for time wasted.

While Emerson commends these aspiring ministers

for their intention to proclaim the message of the divine meaning of existence, he emphasizes – in the face of all of the important mainstream religious figures present in the front row – that the contemporary church that they are intending to enter is failing to do its proper job. He tells them that “the need was never greater of new revelation than now” because of “the universal decay and now almost death of faith in society,” all of which results from the fact that “[t]he soul is not preached.” Emerson continues that he would be negligent if he were to tell those “whose hope and commission it is to preach the faith of Christ” that at the present time in our congregations “the faith of Christ is preached.” While preaching is supposed to be “the expression of the moral sentiment in application to the duties of life,” Emerson wonders, “[i]n how many churches, by how many prophets, ... is man made sensible that he is an infinite Soul; that the earth and heavens are passing into his mind; that he is drinking forever the soul of God?” (83–84). Where is the recognition that our lives are sacred too?

Instead of offering this pragmatic message, Emerson believes that too many preachers in too many congregations are formalists who are serving up only the shell of religion to their undernourished congregants. Not only do the ministers’ prayers fail to uplift us, he continues, they also “smite and offend us”; and those who offer them assault us with their preaching. In such congregations, “[w]e shrink as soon as the prayers begin.” In such congregations, we cannot tell if the preacher “had ever lived and acted,” since “[n]ot one fact in all his experience, had he yet imported into his doctrine.” For Emerson, on the contrary, “[t]he true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life, – life passed through the fire of thought” (84–85). He continues that at present too much preaching “comes out of the memory, and not out of the soul,” and in consequence it fails to reach “what is necessary and eternal.” This preaching has withdrawn “from the exploration of the moral nature of man, where the sublime is, where are the resources of astonishment and power” (86). As a result, Emerson tells the new preachers, the church has fallen into decay.

The litany of criticisms of the church that Emerson offered at the Divinity School was thus designed to lead his audience back to the soul. “In the soul,” he tells these young preachers, “let the redemption be sought” (88); and the church will only be salvaged when we recognize that “[t]he remedy to their deformity is, first, soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul” (91). While he admits that some preachers may be doing an adequate job, and that even bad preaching helps some people, much needs to be done. In his eyes, most of the contemporary preachers are not preaching a living gospel. They preach inherited and dead doctrines, whereas a living gospel would advance a recognition of the fullness of experience. Among his pragmatic suggestions to the young ministers are the following: do not imitate other preachers, however good they may be, and refuse to model your message on the messages of others; recognize that God is still present in all that exists; help the people to find God in their lives since all are part of the Over-soul; and return from second-hand life to the fullness of experience within nature and preach the living soul.

Emerson believes that the awakened individual – minister or congregant – who lives in Reason rather than in the Understanding, brings “revolution.” To such an awakened person “all books are legible, all things transparent, [but] all religions are forms.” The truly religious person is “the wonderworker,” for whom mistaken commitments to “[t]he stationariness of religion; the assumption that the age of inspiration is past, that the Bible is closed; [and] the fear of degrading the character of Jesus by representing him as a man,” all indicate “with sufficient clearness the falsehood” of the beliefs of the unawakened. For Emerson, the job of “a true preacher” is to demonstrate “that God is, not was; that He speaketh, not spake” (88). Rather than repeating the familiar and threadbare in their preaching, it is necessary to preach the Spirit, the Soul, approachable only through Reason. The job that Emerson recommends to the young preachers is to find their own way to enlighten their congregations. He urges each of them to recognize himself as “a newborn

bard of the Holy Ghost,” and to live by the creed that “[i]mitation cannot go above its model” (89).

IV

Emerson returns twenty-two years later to many of these themes of pragmatic spirituality in his 1860 essay “Worship.” Here he points again to the fact that our inherited church is moribund, and that newer, but still inadequate, faiths are growing. “The stern old faiths have all pulverized,” he writes, leaving “a whole population of gentlemen and ladies out in search of religions” (1056). He recognizes that our religions are limited by the level of the enlightenment of their believers. As he notes, “the religion cannot arise above the state of the votary” (1057); but, for this, our inherited church is largely responsible because it has demoralized, rather than awakened, us. Emerson writes that “[w]e live in a transition period, when the old faiths which comforted nations, and . . . made nations, seem to have spent their force.” Rather than guiding the people upward, “the religions of men at this moment” are “either childish and insignificant, or unmanly and effeminating” (1058).¹ He writes here of the too-often fatal split between thought and action, “between religion and morality,” that cuts religious thinking off from a life of action and leaves religious people unable to move forward. “Not knowing what to do, we ape our ancestors”; and, as a result, “the churches stagger backward into the mummeries of the dark ages” (1058–1059). Emerson believes that, because of the failures in our congregations, great numbers of the unawakened will remain lost. “Such as you are, the gods themselves could not help you,” he writes. These people suffer “from their obvious inequality to their own necessities,” from political or social or medical difficulties, and they would not be disappointed to be “dismissed from the duties of life” (1075). Emerson,

¹ By his choice of words here, Emerson seems to show no recognition of the possibilities for women to help overcome the problems of the church. Rather, he continues to assert in a similar fashion, and in conflict with his own expressed position on the dignity of all humans, that “[w]hat is called religion effeminates and demoralizes us” (Emerson, R. W. 1983, 1075).

however, reminds them and us that death will offer them no benefit.

As before, Emerson maintains that the temple of God will continue to survive within the individual soul. In spite of the severity of our religious problems, he maintains that there is still the moral sense that “reappears to-day with the same morning newness that has been from of old the fountain of beauty and strength.” Just as “the multitude of the sick shall not make us deny the existence of health,” nor “rainy weather” the existence of the sun (1061), our present low level of living should not cause us to abandon our quest for a higher type of life. Emerson further maintains that “[t]he builder of heaven has not so ill constructed his creature as that the religion, that is, the public nature, should fall out.” Rather, the God of Spirit “builds his temple in the heart on the ruins of churches and religions” (1056). What continues to be missing is adequate spiritual guidance. Recalling his earlier message to the new preachers, Emerson writes that “[i]n all ages, souls out of time, extraordinary, prophetic, are born”; and these enlightened individuals – all of us potentially – have the means to transcend their particular time and locality, and to help others similarly to transcend. If they can overcome the deadening forces from religion’s past, by which our potential insights are too often “dragged down into a savage interpretation” (1057) of what our lives might mean, these individuals can help advance the life of spirit. So, Emerson urges us to abandon barren intellectual pursuits like theology, and to try to become more spiritual in our living. “Forget your books and traditions,” he writes, “and obey your moral perceptions at this hour.” If we can live according to Reason, we will be less likely to confuse the “spiritual” with the “invisible.” We will recognize, rather, that “[t]he true meaning of *spiritual* is *real*,” and we will come to recognize “that law which executes itself, which works without means, and which cannot be conceived as not existing” (1062).

Emerson re-asserts that “[a]ll the great ages have been ages of belief” (1063); but this belief must come from within. It must arise out of the spirit and recognize

and cultivate the mysterious. "That only which we have within," he writes, "can we see without" (1070); and only Reason can bring us to the appreciation of miracles. "Miracles come to the miraculous," he writes, "not to the arithmetician" (1074). As a result, if our lives have no spirituality, he believes that it is because we seek none; and, for this, the church is largely to blame. "If we meet no gods, it is because we harbor none," Emerson continues; but, on the contrary, "[i]f there is grandeur in you, you will find grandeur in porters and sweeps." The individual is only "rightly immortal, to whom all things are immortal" (1070).

Emerson's pragmatic message is that we must reject the dead ends both of materialism and of abstract theology, and focus directly via Reason on the appreciation of human virtues. He writes that "I look on those sentiments which make the glory of the human being, love, humility, faith, as being also the intimacy of Divinity" at the atomic level; and, when the individual has correctly established this relationship of human and divine virtues, "assurances and provisions emanate from the interior of his body and his mind" (1071). The development of this new religious life that Emerson calls for "to guide and fulfil the present and coming ages... must be intellectual," he writes, although not in some abstract and cold sense. His new church will be "founded on moral science." It will further "have heaven and earth for its beams and rafters; science for symbol and illustration; it will fast enough gather beauty, music, picture, poetry" (1076).

V

Readers of Emerson realize that it is possible to get caught up in the surface message of his religious discussions, and to focus on his charges of ministerial malpractice in their myriad forms instead of on his positive call for advancing the Spirit. His criticisms are focused and specific, but the repairs that he advocated – working through Reason rather than the Understanding – might appear to be vague and open-ended. It is similarly possible to read Emerson primarily as a poetic metaphysician, and to fixate in wonder on the ideas and the intellectual

structures that he and his commentators offer us, without attempting to connect these ideals with our problematic lives. Perhaps this helps to explain why Emerson is so often left out of pragmatic considerations and neglected despite the obvious pragmatic value of his texts to awaken and inspire readers. To concentrate our attention on the fine points of his version of idealism, however, or of his version of religion, seems to me to be a mistake. It is, as Dewey writes, to focus on Emerson's means rather than on his end, to worry about the specific problems that had to be overcome in reaching for a higher life, and to miss the pragmatic core of his message. We are far better off to emphasize, with McDermott, the possibilities inherent in individuals, and in the richness of the American experience, as a means to recognize the power of Emerson's pragmatic thought.

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