

Dugan Lentz

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The Dangers of Nonconformity

“Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist.” That is how influential writer and thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson begins his discussion on conformity in his 1841 essay, “Self-Reliance.” The paragraph that follows details the sacred quality of one’s own mind, a point representative of the essay as a whole, in which Emerson argues that for an individual to achieve the peak of human happiness, virtue, and greatness, he must consider his nature sacred and abide by it. Adhering to old traditions only leads to conformity, Emerson argues, a state of being where one’s individuality is threatened and the integrity of one’s very being challenged. Despite Emerson being a fierce advocate for personal autonomy, bemoaning man’s propensity to “capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions,” many of his talking points reflect ideas birthed by names like Immanuel Kant and literary movements like romanticism. Whether Emerson is championing American individualism or harkening back to Enlightenment thinkers, his claim that the self should reign supreme over so-called ‘dead institutions’ should be read not as an invitation to break free from social restraints, but as a rejection of the structures that unite us.

It is no surprise that Emerson thinks of institutions as suffocating the human spirit. Since Descartes said “I think, therefore, I am,” philosophers have been promoting the use of reason and inner logic to make sense of the world in lieu of blindly following the dictates of the Roman Catholic Church. Emerson clearly wishes society could return to this way of thinking when he says man “quotes some saint or sage” and “dares not say ‘I think,’ ‘I am’.” Of course, in quoting Descartes, Emerson is guilty of his own complaint.

To understand where Emerson is coming from with his ideas concerning the self, one must consider the literary environment in which he was writing. Although Emerson was known for pioneering the transcendentalism movement of the nineteenth century, “Self-Reliance” is really a product of romanticism. In his book *Remaking the World*, Andrew Wilson summarizes the major tenets of this literary movement in eight words: Inwardness, Infinity, Imagination, Individuality, Inspiration, Intensity, Innocence, and Ineffability (Wilson, 189). Looking through Emerson’s essay, it’s easy to identify these romantic themes. The idea of inwardness, or as Wilson puts it, the idea that “authenticity matters more than compliance with expectations” can be seen in the passage when Emerson says, “No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature” (Norton, 598). Individualism is heavily encouraged throughout: “Do your work, and you shall reinforce yourself” (Norton, 599). Inspiration, the notion that great artists were geniuses who “broke rules” and “transformed art,” is reflected in the first paragraph of “Self-Reliance”: “The highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato, and Milton, is that they set at naught books and traditions, and spoke not what men but what they thought” (Norton, 596). To give one more example, there is evidence of innocence, or the idea of the ‘noble savage’, when he speaks of the “naked New Zealander” whose “aboriginal strength” is superior to the white man’s sophisticated tools and technology (Norton, 611).

Understanding that Emerson is deeply entrenched in romantic ideas is important because it allows us to see how his words are part of a larger movement trying to explain a way to live truthfully in a world that had replaced religion with reason. Roughly sixty years before “Self-Reliance” was published, Immanuel Kant published his 1784 essay, “What is Enlightenment?” The first paragraph is essentially a summary of Emerson’s essay.

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another. This

immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. Sapere Aude! “Have courage to use your own understanding!”--that is the motto of enlightenment. (Kant, 1)

So if Emerson is merely the latest iteration of thinkers proclaiming the virtues of self-reliance, then it stands to reason that his motivation for writing stems from a sincere belief in the social utility of the message, rather strictly from a personal agenda (though the two may go hand-in-hand). What might that social utility be? Inwardness and individuality, through which comes truth and morality. “Do your thing, and I shall know you,” Emerson says. “Do your work and you shall reinforce yourself.” This is individualism. The authentic self is one that doesn’t “maintain a dead church, contribute to a dead Bible-Society, vote with a great party either for the Government or against it, spread your table like base housekeepers” (Norton, 599). “Nothing at last is sacred but the integrity of our own mind,” Emerson states. This is inwardness. The sacred self is the new moral order, the only true arbiter when it comes to determining right from wrong. This begs the question: can the self be trusted? If it can, then Emerson is right to encourage a complete rejection of traditions and institutions because they only serve to oppress our authentic selves—the root of everything sacred and virtuous. If, however, the self cannot be trusted, then breaking free from all social restraints will lead only to ruin and chaos.

One could look at this question through a religious, specifically Judeo-Christian, lens and understand the self to be inherently broken and sinful. In “Self-Reliance,” Emerson recounts a time when he asked a church-going friend of his: “What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within?” The friend said, “But these impulses may be from below, not from above,” to which Emerson replied, “They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the devil's child, I will live then from the devil” (Norton, 598). Emerson’s view of God is, as Emerson scholar Jay William Hudson puts it, “essentially Oriental rather than Christian”

(Hudson, 204). Hudson summarizes Emerson's writing in his essay *The Over-soul* by writing, "God's will is supreme—so supreme over the wills of men that Emerson explicitly says that none of us can wrong the universe, even if he would" (Hudson, 205). To quote from *The Over-soul* directly, "It is not mine or thine, but the will of all mind. A breath of will blows eternally through the universe of souls in the direction of the Right and Necessary." In other words, an individual can do no wrong if one's actions align with their true nature, since God's will is supreme. Thus, morality for Emerson hinges on whether or not a person relies on their own instinct. Indeed, it is spontaneity and instinct that Emerson deems "the essence of genius, the essence of virtue, and the essence of life" (Norton, 603). For now, let us accept Emerson's position that the self is not only to be trusted but worshiped as something sacred. In the wake of this revelation, self-reliance is now of the utmost importance. So, then, how important are traditions and institutions to society's well-being? To what extent is conformity even necessary?

Displacing the old in favor of the present is a prevalent theme in Emerson's essay. Old things pass away for a reason, namely that wiser ideas supplant them. "Is the acorn better than the oak which is its fulness and completion? Is the parent better than the child into whom he has cast his ripened being? Whence then this worship of the past?" (Norton, 604). The tradition vs. progress debate is complicated; no doubt a fine balance must be struck for society to function optimally. But for Emerson to so readily dismiss the wisdom of the ages is questionable. The principle of Chesterton's Fence wasn't around in the nineteenth century, but it's nonetheless true that traditions survive for a reason, and it's often best to remember those reasons. Religion, for instance, serves a vital purpose. In a previous quote, Emerson identifies the institution of religion as a major trapping of conformity.

In *The Over-soul*, Emerson imagines a church that "shall send man home to his central solitude, shame these social, supplicating manners" (Hudson, 208). Spirituality, it seems, should

be an activity best practiced alone, in one's own heart. Emerson's dismissal of church liturgies isn't entirely unjustified. Christianity, or rather those who falsely proclaim it, has hurt a lot of people through manipulation or outright abuse. One only has to look at the Roman Catholic Church in the centuries before the Reformation to see how blind conformity to a religious institution could lead to people being taken advantage of. Wouldn't it be better, then, to let organized religion die with the past and limit celebrating the spiritual to one's own mind? While a staunch non-conformist like Emerson would certainly think so, there are ramifications to consider.

In his book, *A Free People's Suicide*, theologian Os Guinness discusses his concept of The Golden Triangle of Freedom, which goes like this: Freedom requires virtue, because a free nation like America needs morality if she wishes to escape tyranny; virtue requires faith, because a moral nation depends on a religious people; and faith requires freedom, because a religious people needs a free nation to escape oppression. A society needs a common set of principles to unite around in order to keep from tumbling into chaos, and if that society is going to last, then those principles need to be from a higher power. To use a quote often misattributed to French travel writer Alexis de Tocqueville, "America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great." In some sense, to believe in America is to believe, consciously or not, in the utility of Judeo-Christian principles: murder is wrong, the poor should be looked after, all men are created equal, to name just a few. It's not a matter of conformity for conformity's sake, it's a universal acknowledgement of an ideal. The reason we stand for the national anthem is the same reason we attend church, or synagogue, or temple—to recognize the existence of something that transcends ourselves. Liberty may mean the state of being free within society from oppressive restrictions imposed by authority, but if we don't use that liberty to seek faith and use that faith to seek virtue, then we may see that freedom give way to

despotism. Institutions, when tyrannically enforced, often give way to corruption, but institutions voluntarily recognized as a social good will lead to unity.

So if some degree of conformity is necessary for social stability, how much room is there for Emerson's idea of the sacred self? What if how a person feels deep down inside clashes with the commonly accepted ideals? Is Emerson right to encourage us to "believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men," or are his words unintentionally misleading?

This brings us to a term called "expressive individualism," defined by Andrew Wilson as "the idea that at the heart of each person is a unique emotional core that needs to find expression for our individuality to be realized" (Wilson, 209). If the self is sacred, then it not only dictates how you act but how the world is supposed to interact with you, meaning how you construe the world supersedes any external realities. Therefore, if we determine what is true based on how we feel, if no outside institution is allowed to shape us, then the full burden of crafting an identity falls on our shoulders. Some may call that liberating, but "absolving you to yourself" is really putting complete faith in the moral integrity of one's inner heart. If literature has shown us anything, it's that the heart of man is not to be trusted. This passage from the romanticist novel *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt summarizes this dilemma well.

What if one happens to be possessed of a heart that can't be trusted--?

What if the heart, for its own unfathomable reasons, leads one willfully and in a cloud of unspeakable radiance away from health, domesticity, civic responsibility and strong social connections and all the blandly-held common virtues and instead straight toward a beautiful flare of ruin, self-immolation, disaster? (Tartt, 916–ebook)

Emerson's argument that nonconformity is essential to discovering the true nature of a person may be true, but the real question is will we like what we find? If everyone lives their

own truth, then it becomes increasingly difficult for people to agree. Conformity is necessary to some degree. Religion, family, nationality, education—they're meant to instill common values and principles that enable people to work together toward a higher goal. It's important that a person be able to think for themselves and gauge what's true and what's not. But in order to do that consistently and reliably you need a set of principles through which to filter an institution's messaging. Relying solely on oneself to provide those principles will not work because feelings fluctuate; they are not a stable foundation on which to build an identity.

While Emerson clearly has no malicious intent in preaching against conformity, his insistence that the way to achieve greatness and virtue is to submit to yourself and no other is detrimental to you and detrimental to society. Breaking free from social restraints forces you to rely on a self that cannot be trusted, which is why "Self-Reliance" should be read as the elevation of the individual at the expense of social order.

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