

The Value of Emerson's Individualism

Moon, Young Shik

The American writer, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who could be considered an apostle of democracy, spent much of his life reflecting upon the nature of individualism and the benefits of self-reliance. As one who traces much of what is good in democracy and individualism back to the influences of the Christian religion in western culture, this writer is gratified by Emerson's own Christian background as a minister. What is surprising, however, is Emerson's later rejection of many of the basic tenets of the Christian faith, including the divinity of Jesus. In spite of this rejection and, perhaps, because of it, Emerson's thought is worthy of study. Particularly of interest to this paper are his views of religion and individualism.

According to Stephen E. Whicher (1971, 54), Emerson moves from idealism to spiritualism. It is clear that his thought is more than idealism, that it is an indicator to guide the path of our lives and a light to our spirits. This path is outlined by Emerson (1950:145) in the following passages in his essays:

Speak your latent conviction.

Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string.

If we live truly, we shall see truly.

Insist on yourself: never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cultivation force of a whole life's cultivation.

The student is to read history actively and not passively; to esteem his own life the text, and books the commentary.

Man thinking must not be subdued by his instruments.

Free should the scholar be free and brave.

As we probe beyond Emerson's rapt affirmations of the soul, we can gauge the quality of his thought.

Spiritualists testify that God dwells in us, and the essential Self creates a new world through us. In such a world, I am convinced that we can enjoy our individualism without any harm to others. True individualism is a product of the relaxation of the authority of custom and tradition as the standard of belief.

Emerson affirms that there are creative manners, creative actions, and creative words. We must be man thinking who reads history, not passively or abstractly, but with subjective applications, who perceive our own lives as text and books as commentary.

I emphasize that such lofty thoughts of Emerson must guide our future lives in the chaos of changed values and morals. Though his pure ideology, we could expect a restoration of our humanness, which has been lost in a mechanistic civilization. Emerson's thought suggests a way of realizing our 'Self' within our philosophical poverty. It Offers a credible basis for the young, who have lost their sense of direction and are bound by frustration, to create a new tomorrow. In an age of distrust, when husband and wife distrust one another and parents and children distrust one another, Emerson's thought plainly shows us the way of right living.

However, transcendental individualism requires a moral rearming. There is little or no hope for social betterment, from Emerson's point of view, unless the people making up the social order learn to take their cues from the "great inward commander" (Dewey: 1944, 305). Because it is important that society regard each individual as of great consequence, a natural basis of mutual respect between persons is needed. First of all, we must be faithful to our individual visions. To establish our own view of value, first of all, is Emerson's great thought:

Good thoughts are no better than good dreams, unless they be executed.

High be his heart, faithful his will, clear his sight, that he may in good earnest be doctrine, society, law, to himself, that simple purpose may be to him as strong as iron necessity is to others!

It is the Universal nature which gives worth to particular men and things. Human life, as containing this, is mysterious and inviolable.

Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.

How precious these philosophies are! We must possess these treasures of wisdom to discern our lives rightfully. Their clairvoyant power can be the social basis and social standard. In such a superior position, we must be free and can enjoy individualism. Such individualism transcends everything and must be natural. The natural liberty of man is to be free from any superior power on earth, and not to be under the will or legislative authority of man, but to have only the law of nature for his rule. The liberty of man in society is to be under no legislative power except that established by consent in the commonwealth, nor under the dominion of any will or restraint of any law (Boller: 1974, 101). This great thought is intrinsic to Emerson's transcendental individualism. Since the law never made men a whit more just (Commins: 1947, 69), the freedom of nature is to be under no restraint except the law of nature so that each individual can, at all times, act in accord with the dictates of that universal 'Self' which is within the mind of each. Personal character can only develop as the individual is aware of himself, his own capacity for choice and endeavor. Since the ego does not operate in Machiavellian way, I am convinced that the ego can contribute to our human benefit. That means the new creation of spiritual culture in the building of a new history of civilization for our society. Then, I am strongly convinced that we can embody righteousness in this world. We can exchange

reciprocal trust; we can have the excellent virtue of veneration for one another; and we can build an efficient society, a lightfilled world. Then there can be no argument of human rights.

In this view, we can be men thinking, rather than mere thinkers as in a degraded society. We can be creative persons who write our own thoughts in our books. Creative manners and creative words will cultivate in us the new ways of the future. This conviction which Emerson suggests will also give insight into today. When our spirit breathes through our intellect, we can create a new world and obtain new energy and penetration. We can refuse and ignore imitation and flattery so that we arrive at the truth. We can cease to be timid or apologetic, acknowledging our own value. When these thoughts are our social standard, our lives and destiny will become guideposts through the achievement of what we seek. In this way we will transcend mundane things, with no impulses aimed toward high official position, reputation, or greatness. Such a character will at the same time, express truth for me and for you. Then, ideally, personal liberty should be like the freedom of nature so that we can enjoy, above all, the freedom to realize within ourselves all possibilities, regardless of social evaluation as "good" or "bad". I mention that it is the Third World which I named before I am convinced that in such a way the Third World can become a paradise where we can realize our egos with sincerity, without any selfishness.

Again, I am convinced that Emerson's idealism offers new hope for the attainment of our vision of the Third World, for the establishment of a new system of values, and for the restoration of our lost lives in our lost generation. In these ways, this idealism is of the greatest possible value and I do not want to apologize for it. I revere Emerson's thought, and especially his idealism, even though there are some irreconcilable points.

As our world is faced with a crisis of conscience, I dare pointed out that Emerson's individualism contains an element of danger because of the varieties of personal convictions and the possibilities of changing history.

However, though history is changing rapidly, it has a circular pattern. From the viewpoint of a circular history, order, justice, wisdom, right judgement, and right deeds are the practical essentials which our needs require. I believe that we must endeavour to aid and protect one another in order to keep and enjoy our given freedom and our individualism. According to Arnold Foster, we need to make efforts for the protection of our legitimate interests:

There can be no doubt that democracy has a right to defend itself from its enemies inside its borders and in foreign lands. How best to do it with the weapon of speech is a serious problem. Until the multiple questions arising out of this free speech issue are resolved within a democratic framework, one must use the weapon of public condemnation (powell: 1961, 49.).

Until we can at once protect ourselves and enjoy our individualism appropriately, I believe we need self-sacrifice too. We need boots which fit our feet, but, in our society,

sometimes the feet must be made to fit our boots through pain and sorrow. Even in such a society, however, our natural liberty and individualism without the restraint of any contrary law. I am going to conclude with a proposal for the achievement of such liberty and individualism.

First, it would be necessary that all people should have good principles and good will, despite differences of approach. In oriental thought, there remain the concepts of moral training and home management, just government, world peace. Such words have meaning. In other words, there can be peace in the world after the individual person controls his own morality and the management of his home, then governs his country accordingly. Emerson was interested in oriental thought and was somewhat influenced by it. From the viewpoint of morality, it is necessary that humanity, first of all, control the self aspiration of the interior life as oriental thought prescribes. When each individual conscience has this same good purpose, then all the consciences of the world will be equally governed by good principles and good will. Although personal ideology may differ, I believe a common goal can at least be shared. Under that condition, I am convinced that we could enjoy our personal individualism. This freedom and individualism, with its many potentialities, could be realized without regard to social pressures. A person with no spiritual dimension could not realize such an individualism, but the heart of every human being contains an eternal 'Self'. I believe that we can realize Emerson's individualism only under this condition that the eternal self does exist and, through it, we can achieve goodness.

Second, all people should possess a moral conscience which seeks righteousness. The great limitation of Emerson's philosophical and literary thought is his light treatment of the problem of evil. I believe that his basic philosophy transcendentalism, should be placed in every human heart. Such an achievement is not possible without the existence of social order.

In a materialistic society, however, the youth experience the difficulties of rapidly changing values and a lack of spiritual direction. As I pointed out previously, in such a society it is impossible to govern people by the law alone because the law can never make man a whit more just. Furthermore, the law itself is sometimes prejudicial. All the people in the world, not only the judicial officers, should possess consciences governed by good will and directed by moral concern. Then, I am convinced that we can realize our individualism perfectly. That which seems right to one will also seem right to others because all share the same aspirations and the same basic morality.

Third, each person should possess a scholarly attitude, that is, the mental discipline necessary to think beyond selfish considerations. If Emerson's individualism cannot be realized it is merely an idealism, but I have insisted that we can realize it. Accordingly, all people need a systematic, logical way of thinking to prevent the overflowing abuses of individualism in our society. A condition is needed in which Self-Reliance for each can also promote the self reliance of other persons in the same way, at the same time. The

scholarly conscience should involve wide, deep, and high thought. Such thought provides a spiritual and philosophic foundation for history and culture, which would otherwise be blind. I am convinced that Emerson's thought has provided a spiritual base in the formation of modern American culture.

Personality can never develop unless individuals consciously choose their own way and make that choice an ethical decision. We should study and possess the scholarly character that cannot be fully conceptualized by the mind but which enables the mind to conceptualize; that cannot be heard by the ear, but by which the ear is able to hear. A society in which every person feels responsibility for others and in which people value one another would be a paradise where we could realize individualism. I conclude with the following words of Emerson:

When it breathes through his intellect, it is genius;
 When it breathes through his will, it is virtue;
 When it flows through his affection, it is love.

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(경희대학교 사범대학 외국어교육과)