

How Emerson Attracted Dewey from the Perspective of “Self-culture” as the Cornerstone of “Inquiry”

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Introduction

I would like to introduce Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) as an influential figure for Dewey's thought. Emerson, nicknamed “the Concord Sage,” is known as the leader of the New England Transcendentalism of the 19th century. In the United States, Emerson is the epitome of the intellectual hero. It is no exaggeration to say that most Americans like him.

As Dewey himself admits, Hegel's influence on Dewey is significant in terms of German idealistic philosophy. On the other hand, as Dewey himself often refers to Emerson in his books, the New England Transcendentalists influence Dewey as a subclass of German Idealist philosophy.

Although Dewey is known for his harsh criticism of Froebel's educational principles, which is based on the Romantic view of children, the way he sees Emerson suggests that Dewey has a favorable view of Emerson's Romanticism. In short, Emerson is an exception even though Dewey dislikes thinkers who speak illogically.

Why, then, is Emerson an exception? I believe this is not simply because of the fact that Americans generally like Emerson, but because Emerson teaches us that Dewey's “quest” theory is true. This was shown to Dewey not only through Emerson's discourse, but also through his very way of life. In a word, it is “self-reliance” and “self-culture” that is carried out through this attitude.

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I. The Philosopher of Democracy

(1) "Man Thinking"

Apart from being the "Saint of Concord," Emerson is also known as "the Philosopher of Democracy." Although Emerson himself did not discuss "democracy" as a central theme, it is significant that his thought attaches the word "democracy."

In "The American Scholar" (1837), which would later be received as the "Intellectual Declaration of Independence," Emerson focused on the United States as a central theme. However, by not discussing American freedom or democracy, he shows independence from the historical context of the United States. Emerson uses the key phrase "Man Thinking."

Man Thinking must not be subdued by his instruments. Books are for the scholar's idle times. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings ¹.

The opposite of this "Man Thinking" is the "bookworm." Emerson despised attitudes which lacked self-reliance in thought, which are enslaved to the conventions of the past, and which do not accompany action. He expressed his vision of a society in which individuals would be respected as individuals, rather than being subsumed into groups, as a result of the development of self-reliance, especially among intellectuals, and the spread of this reliance throughout society. This view of society was shared not only in the U.S. at that time, but also in societies advocating democracy today.

Another sign of our times, also marked by an analogous political movement, is the new importance given to the single person. Everything that tends to insulate the individual—to surround him with barriers of natural respect, so that each man shall feel the world is his, and man shall treat with man as a sovereign state with a sovereign state—tends to true union as well as greatness ².

While Emerson's view of society thus emphasizes the individual, and how the individual, separated from his or her surroundings, can form solidarity with others and shape society is precisely related to the concept of "reason." This is at the core of his transcendentalist thought. The individual is cut off from his or her surroundings, but this is not

¹ Emerson, R. W., "The American Scholar," *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, vol.1*, Boston & New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1903-1904, pp.88-91

² *Ibid.*, p.113

an egoistic view of society in which there is no one else. The self-reliance required was also different from simply being self-assertive.

Based on this view of society, Emerson's plan for social reform was an individualistic social reform through the improvement of the individual's moral character. In this case, too, it was not the self-sufficient improvement of the individual, but the improvement of the personality as a social being with ties to others.

(2) The "Great Reason" ("Over-Soul") that Flows through the Psyche of the Individual

By the way, Emerson's answer to the question of how democracy is possible is simple. It is through the "Intuition" that people can have through being united by "Reason" (also known as "Over-Soul"), which enables everyone to have a moral perception of the world. When we hear the word "Reason," we generally tend to limit it to one of the cognitive faculties of modern philosophy, no matter how high we place it. Or, to put it more prosaically, we tend to think of it as the power to control our senses and emotions. Emerson's "Reason" is a more multifaceted and multidimensional concept than this. He says:

……that Unity, that Over-soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart, of which all sincere conversation is the worship, to which all right action is submission³.

Not only Emerson, but also the Transcendentalists explained their views of nature and world by the notion that all things and events, including human beings, encompass the spirit of God. In nineteenth-century America, the relationship between God and human beings was basically separate. The subject-object "inseparability," not only between God and man, is a major feature of Emerson's thought.

II. Criticism of Pulpit Philosophy and Philosophy of Life

Emerson's view of "philosophy" is vividly expressed in his discussion of Plato in "Representative Men" (1850). The Saxons and Romans are not only an honor and a disgrace to mankind because they have failed to add even a single thought to Plato's categories. He had neither wife nor children, and the thinkers of all civilized nations are his descendants and

³ Emerson, R. W., "The Over-Soul," *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, vol.2*, Boston & New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1903-1904, p.269

are colored by his spirit, while asserting that "Plato is philosophy, and philosophy, Plato" ⁴. Emerson regarded Plato as a philosopher because Plato was "a man who lived philosophy" and because of his attitude toward life. Emerson saw in Plato a way of searching for the "laws of the mind," the ideal, on the one hand, and the "order of nature," the destiny, on the other, with the former as the "one" and the latter as the "diversity" that he sought.

Plato, lover of limits, loved the illimitable, saw the enlargement and nobility which come from truth itself and good itself, and attempted as if on the part of the human intellect, once for all to do it adequate homage, homage fit for the immense soul to receive, and yet homage becoming the intellect to render ⁵.

The most positive feature of the world perception shaped by Plato's method of intellectual inquiry, Emerson emphasizes, was the lack of a system. Emerson says,

He attempted a theory of the universe, and his theory is not complete or self-evident. One man thinks he means this, and another that; he has said one thing in one place, and the reverse of it in another place. He is charged with having failed to make the transition from ideas to matter. Here is the world, sound as a nut, perfect, not the smallest piece of chaos left, never a stitch nor an end, not a mark of haste, or botching, or second thought; but the theory of the world is a thing of shreds and patches ⁶.

As Emerson himself states, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds" ⁷, and his lectures and writings are also not consistent and "logical" in the sense that they are difficult to understand. In his essays, too, the leaps of logic in his writing often disgust anyone who reads them, but even with this in mind, we can still inwardly recognize the truthfulness of his words.

The world of logic, which is constructed based on the real world, is only a part of the real world constructed within the individual. The sharing of logic with others is possible only when it is encoded in language. Since language does not express the whole of the real world constituted within the individual, the logic expressed through language is only a part of the real

⁴ Emerson, R. W., "Representative Man," *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, vol.4*, Boston & New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1903-1904, p.40

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.67

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.76

⁷ Emerson, R. W., "Self-Reliance," *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, vol.2*, Boston & New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1903-1904, p.57

world, or experience, within the individual.

Life is our dictionary. Years are well spent in country labors; in town; in the insight into trades and manufactures; in frank intercourse with many men and women; in science; in art; to the one end of mastering in all their facts a language by which to illustrate and embody our perceptions⁸.

Life-based thinking is always connected to action. It transcends the academic world dominated by universities and books. By encouraging thinking in action, Emerson opened “knowledge” to all people as consumers, and he respected the “knowledge” that is shared in the living.

We have our theory of life, our religion, our philosophy; and the event of each moment, the shower, the steamboat disaster, the passing of a beautiful face, the apoplexy of our neighbor, are all tests to try our theory, the approximate result we call truth, and reveal its defects. If I have renounced the search of truth, if I have come into the port of some pretending dogmatism, some new church or old church, some Schelling or Cousin, I have died to all use of these new events that are born out of prolific time into multitude of life every hour. I am as a bankrupt to whom brilliant opportunities offer in vain⁹.

This teaching by Emerson to value one’s own theory of life, one’s own way of life according to one’s own beliefs, leads to his educational discourse.

III. The Coincidence of “Learning” and “Living”

Emerson’s literal view of education is presented in “Education” (1876).

I believe that our own experience instructs us that the secret of Education lies in respecting the pupil. It is not for you to choose what he shall know, what he shall do. It is chosen and foreordained, and he only holds the key to his own secret. By your tampering and thwarting and too much governing he may be hindered from his end

⁸ Emerson, R. W., “The American Scholar,” *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, vol.1*, p.87

⁹ Emerson, R. W., “Education,” *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, vol.10*, Boston & New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1903-1904, pp.132-133.

and kept out of his own. Respect the child ¹⁰.

This is the theoretical basis on which he bases the experience of learners in educational settings. In the second half of the 19th century, compulsory schooling, which had been open only to children of a limited class since antiquity, was introduced to all citizens in the major countries of the time, leading to a renewal of the "one-size-fits-all" approach to education in modern schools. This led to a renewal of the educational method of "uniform teaching" with "uniform content" in modern schools. At the end of the 19th century, a worldwide movement arose against this system from the standpoint of the "new education". In the U.S., the movement developed as a progressive educational movement led by Dewey, and in the history of education, Emerson is positioned as the ideological origin of progressive education.

It is important to respect and to learn from the cultural heritage as experiences accumulated by our predecessors in the long history of humankind. In the life given to an individual, it is impossible, both in time and space, to directly experience all of the experiences of our predecessors. Therefore, it also becomes necessary for teachers to teach effectively as "minimum essentials," an array of experiences that are useful and essential to the child.

Emerson's view of nature as "a symbol of the spirit" is also a request for an attitude of investigating external nature with one's own spirit. I believe this can be a way of expressing in one's spirit an awareness accompanied by a sense of reality through a wholehearted and sincere attitude toward the subject. The transcendentalists' rhetoric that man and nature are encompassed by God is true to their perception of nature. However, the true meaning is not that truth is passively granted by the magic word "God," but rather that the truth of one's own perception requires proactive efforts to reach the divine realm. Rather, it requires a proactive effort until one's own perception becomes true to the realm of the divine. Such recognition, of course, cannot be achieved through borrowed knowledge from someone other than oneself, nor can it be acquired only in the world of symbols, where experience is discarded. In this sense, Emerson acknowledges the superiority of his own intuition as a sense of reality over the logic presented by symbols.

He shall see that nature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part. One is seal and one is print. Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind. Its laws are the laws of his own mind. Nature then becomes to him the measure of his attainments. So much of nature as he is ignorant of, so much of his own mind does he not yet possess.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.143-144

And, in fine, the ancient precept, “Know thyself,” and the modern precept, “Study nature,” become at last one maxim¹¹.

Emerson’s statement can be interpreted in a Romanticist way, as an exaltation of the poet’s intuition that the inner spirit of the individual is reflected in the outer nature. However, the equation of “know thyself” and “study nature” in the last part of the quote, when put into a theory in school education, is the starting point of problem-solving learning, which enables us to perceive the things and events of the outer world in relation to ourselves through knowing ourselves. Pedagogy since the modern era has repeatedly been advocating the importance of thinking about one’s own situation and acquiring knowledge that is essential and useful to oneself through the study of nature as direct experience, rather than through memorization of indirect experience as symbols. American progressive education, as represented by Dewey, is a representative of this type of methodological principle. American progressive education, as represented by Dewey, is representative of this type of methodological principle.

IV. One’s Life Affirmation as a Premise of Pragmatism

Emerson’s self-based way of perceiving the world, as we have seen above, has often been placed at the source of pragmatism. Although there is an affinity between pragmatism’s subjective engagement with the object of cognition, or inquiry, and the transcendentalist Emerson’s idea of self-trust, it is not enough to place it at the source of pragmatism. This is because it is impossible to see the connection between the “provisional truth,” attitude of pragmatist inquiry, and Emerson’s idea of self-trust. This is a problem related to the time frame of subjective engagement with the object of self-trust.

Nor can he blink the freewill. To hazard the contradiction,—freedom is necessary. If you please to plant yourself on the side of Fate, and say, Fate is all; then we say, a part of Fate is the freedom of man. Forever wells up the impulse of choosing and acting in the soul. Intellect annuls Fate. So far as a man thinks, he is free. And though nothing is more disgusting than the crowing about liberty by slaves, as most men are, and the flippant mistaking for freedom of some paper preamble like a “Declaration of Independence,” or the statute right to vote, by those who have never dared to think or to act, yet it is wholesome to man to look not at Fate, but the other way: the practical view is the other. His sound relation to these facts is to use and command,

¹¹ Emerson, R. W., “The American Scholar,” *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, vol.1*, pp.97-98

not to cringe to them¹².

Emerson's attitude toward facts is active and pioneering, and when viewed as a time frame, it is variable and leaves room for coincidence, and his expression suggests that he rather enjoys the indeterminacy of chance. The world is a dynamic, ever-present, ever-changing object, and humans, as the subjects of perception, are also required to be dynamic.

It is one thing to choose a path that has already been trodden by others, but it is also another thing to be caught up in convention. From the 1830s, however, Emerson repeatedly emphasized the need for America to become spiritually independent from Europe by thinking for itself, standing on its own two feet, and walking on its own two feet. The period between the Civil Wars was a time of political and economic change, and although supported by the optimistic ideas of "progress" at the time, it remained difficult to predict the changes that would take place now and in the future. The compass that would guide one's life was not a ready-made compass given by others, but a magnet that would allow one to make flexible decisions in relation to one's environment according to circumstances. Emerson's philosophy was a kind of gospel, a "doctrine of self-reliance," that emerged at a time such as today.

Conclusion: The Certain Self as the Starting Point of "Inquiry"

I have discussed the reasons why Emerson's method of cognition and educational thought are positioned as the origin of pragmatism and why progressive educational theory was developed, focusing on the way Emerson's "knowledge" as a common philosopher.

In *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (1922), Dewey, in conjunction with his review of Emerson, expresses an unusually favorable assessment of Romanticism.

But we also have a sneaking sympathy for the courage of an Emerson in declaring that consistency should be thrown to the winds when it stands between us and the opportunities of present life. We reach out to the opposite extreme of our ideal of fixity, and under the guise of a return to nature dream of a romantic freedom, in which all life is plastic to impulse, a continual source of improvised spontaneities and novel inspirations. We rebel against all organization and all stability¹³.

¹² Emerson, R. W., *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, vol.9*, Boston & New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1903-1904, p.23

¹³ Dewey, J., *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology*, New York, Henry Holt & Co., 1922, p.100.

In life, the standard of evaluation of thought and action is the adequacy of self-controlled thought and action. If the theory of Deweyan inquiry is to grasp the self in relation to the object in the particular situation and to govern the self, the unshakable self through self-cultivation based on the self-reliance demanded by Emerson is the foundation of the individual as thinking and acting subjects. Without the foothold of the unshakable, the recognition of an indeterminate situation that is out of harmony as a problematic situation between the self and the environment, which is the starting point of inquiry, cannot be established. In this sense, Emerson's self-cultivation based on self-realization was also the key to Dewey's "inquiry."

In this way, as has often been pointed out, Dewey not only sought the reason for his respect for children in Emerson's romantic expression as a poet, but also saw the prototype for his "inquiry" theory in Emerson's view of education, and it is possible to interpret that Dewey Emerson was a theorist who guided actual educational practice.