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*Traditions of  
Pragmatism  
and the Myth  
of the  
Emersonian  
Democrat*

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**Abstract**

Beginning with Emerson's turn from his pulpit, many argue that American philosophy has rigorously held forth against supernaturalism and metaphysics. While most read self-reliance as a call for individualism, I argue that self-reliance is the application of the moral sentiment to the source of existence Emerson calls the Over-soul. Figures like George Kateb, Stanley Cavell, and Jeffrey Stout have presented a very different picture of American pragmatism. Stout, in particular, is responsible for building up what I call "the myth of the Emersonian democrat." We find that a few philosophical positions generally constitute this myth. The Emersonian democrat is secular, sceptical, relativist, anti-realist, and anti-metaphysical. In fact, on my reading of the strand of pragmatism running from Emerson through James to Dewey, the pluralism of the Emersonian democrat *depends* on certain metaphysical commitments. The traditional reading of Emerson as anti-religion, and by extension, anti-religious, impedes a better understanding of self-reliance and obfuscates some of the Emersonian inheritances in James and Dewey.

*Keywords: Emerson, Cavell, Stout,  
Pragmatism, Self-reliance*

Much current work in American pragmatism has productively returned Emerson to the conversation. Beginning with Emerson's turn from his pulpit, many argue that American philosophy has rigorously held forth against supernaturalism and the Platonic metaphysical distinction between transcendent forms and ideas, and those creatures left behind and below in an insignificant realm of appearances.<sup>1</sup> Part of

this argument rests on the assumption that Emerson, James, and Dewey are anything but *metaphysical*. On a closer reading, however, one immediately runs into Emerson's metaphysical commitments. Emerson is often read with a blind eye toward his religious philosophy. Returning to his writings, however, it is difficult to ignore the religiosity which permeates his thought. In many ways, the reading of the classical American philosophers I would like to offer mimics that of John E. Smith. Smith's attention to the "recovery of experience" in American philosophy directed me to an attentive reading of the sources.<sup>2</sup>

Placing Emerson at the head of the family tree, one quickly recognizes the pragmatic possibilities of Emerson's thought and certain Emersonian tendencies in Dewey and James. Central to my reading of Emerson is a discussion of the role the religious or moral sentiment plays in converting the individual *into her will*, as insight and affection are directed toward the future and its possibilities. Santayana and Rorty identify Emerson as a Transcendentalist for whom autonomy was more important than questions of truth and beauty. This reading of Emerson misses a great deal. While most read self-reliance as a call for individualism, I argue that self-reliance is the application of the moral sentiment to the source of existence Emerson calls the Over-soul.<sup>3</sup>

I see a part of the turn to experience in pragmatism in Emerson's recentering of authority in the individual. He rejects the absolute power of fate as he does the Calvinist determination of human sinfulness and the subjection of the individual to tradition. Emerson draws on William Ellery Channing and James Marsh, as he works through an understanding of the renewed powers of individual reason. Here, he presents an often ambiguous but interesting picture of the location and role of nature. For Emerson, nature is fluid and impersonal, but also the necessary grounding for a rich and meaningful life. The themes I find in Emerson bear out a coherent argument found throughout Emerson's writings: Unitarianism exemplifies in particular those problems with which religious traditions (and America) in general are fraught; we have become deaf to and ignorant of the unity of nature and spirit and the oneness of existence. The solution Emerson provides is a renewing empiricism, a self-reliance which awakens the individual to this yet undiscovered nature. The Emersonian roots of classical American philosophy are expressed, in part, in the radical empiricism of James, where Emerson's holism resounds in the *continuities of experience* and in the replacement of *religion* with the *religious* and metaphysical duality with *experience* in Dewey.

Figures like George Kateb, Stanley Cavell, and Jeffrey Stout have presented a very different picture of American pragmatism. Stout, in particular, is responsible for building up what I call "the myth of the Emersonian democrat." We find that a few philosophical positions generally constitute this myth. The Emersonian democrat is secular, sceptical,

relativist, anti-realist, and anti-metaphysical. In fact, on my reading of the strand of pragmatism running from Emerson through James to Dewey, the pluralism of the Emersonian democrat *depends* on certain metaphysical commitments. His democratic tendencies, or, what makes him a democrat, is his pluralistic metaphysics. This is what leads Dewey to call Emerson the “philosopher of democracy.” James, too, draws on those parts of Emersonian thought which emphasize metaphysical intimacy and oneness with an unseen order. Emerson is a model of anti-traditional thought: he rejects dogma and the authority of a church elite; he turns to experience as the substance of a forward-looking world and philosophy; and he seeks an unmediated encounter with the divine, in whatever shape or form one may imagine the divine. But as the harbinger of “democratic individualism,” Emerson does not project a notion of self-reliance in which the individual relies only on herself. The traditional reading of Emerson as anti-religion, and by extension, anti-religious, impedes a better understanding of self-reliance and obfuscates some of the Emersonian inheritances in James and Dewey.

### *Rejecting the Religious in Emerson*

At the beginning of the current renaissance of Emerson studies, Bart Giamatti weighed in with a famous repudiation of the joys of Emerson. Giamatti paints a markedly contrarian picture of Emerson. “Strangely enough,” he writes, “Emerson lives in the popular imagination as the Lover of Nature, a sweet, sentimental, Yankee Kahlil Gibran. In fact, Emerson is as sweet as barbed wire, and his sentimentality as accommodating as brick. His everlasting harm comes because he knew Americans would forever feel themselves derived, or secondhand. And so his greatest contribution to our culture, and greatest disservice, lies in the assurances with which in subtle and obvious ways he justified jettisoning history” (Giamatti, 174, 175). Giamatti’s interpretation emphasizes Emerson’s supposed fondness for a type of power that seems to inhibit the recognition of tradition and history. His Emerson is all brashness and forcefulness without constructive purpose. My reading and representation of Emerson could not be more different. The turn from history Giamatti bemoans, speaks to me of independence and possibility, a rejection of dogma and ancient authorities, an awakening from inherited mythologies, a turn toward a peculiar kind of self-reliance that depends on the intuition and revelation of a wholeness and unity within nature, and a renewed appreciation for one’s existence in a natural order that both supports and is sustained by the powers of human reason. Emerson advocated freedom from a kind of philosophical and religious dependence on foreign oil.

Emerson’s turn to immediate or direct experience, “*life lived at first hand*,” is meant as a refutation of and alternative to traditional religious dogma and mediation (James 1988, 1121). This said, Emerson’s writ-

ings are shot through with, for lack of a better expression, religiosity. Emerson begins a process of reconstructing religion which continues through James and Dewey. This starts with his turn to individual experience and what Dewey calls his democratic philosophy; “the reduction of all the philosophers . . . to the test of trial by the service rendered the present and immediate experience” (Dewey, 1903, 410). For Dewey, Emerson is the “Philosopher of Democracy,” because he elevates and emphasizes the possibilities of human experience:

His ideas are not fixed upon any Reality that is beyond or behind or in any way apart, and hence they do not have to be bent. They are versions of the Here and Now, and flow freely. The reputed transcendental worth of an overweening Beyond and Away, Emerson, jealous for spiritual democracy, finds to be the possession of the unquestioning Present.

Against creed and system, convention and institution, Emerson stands 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, 1903, 411)

It was not originally obvious to me why Dewey calls Emerson “The Philosopher of Democracy.” But there is a natural and commonsense connection between Emerson’s philosophy of the present and Dewey’s notion of the core of democratic philosophy. As I hope to show, the centering of religious authority in the individual (a large part of my understanding of Emersonian self-reliance) and not in a church hierarchy or force or Being which sits apart from the natural world or beyond human reach, reflects a similar political move away from leaders whose power flows from divine right and towards an appreciation of the right and power of the individual.

It will take some work to tease out the details of Emerson’s religious philosophy, but doubtless, it is in some form what turned him from his pulpit and opened him to the possibility of a ‘religiosity’ which transcends any particular religious tradition. Emerson shares his empiricism and consequent democratic tendency with William James and John Dewey. Placing Emerson in line with James and Dewey is not meant to suggest that he was a pragmatist, but that there is a great deal to be gained by reading James and Dewey after Emerson, especially with an eye towards the religious aspects of his philosophy and the philosophical aspects of his religiosity.

The reconstruction of religion in Emerson works in a number of directions. First, there is an undeniable romantic-naturalism in his writings. One can and should go out into nature, into the fields and forests and be renewed. Emerson’s love of nature and what might be appropriately called his mystical tendency (or, at least his tendency to

identify the substance of nature with some divine quality) appear in a similar form in James' *Varieties* as a "piecemeal supernaturalism." In the passage from Dewey, we find another meaning for Emerson's naturalistic tendencies, one that sets it against a philosophy which sets "Reality" *away and beyond* human experience.

It follows, then, that Emerson's religiosity may be read as natural and not *supernatural*, which may account for his centrality in a tradition of arts and letters which dates to his decisive split with organized religion. There is a tension that lingers in Emerson, that permeates his writing and the study of it, between his notions of self-reliance and organized religion, and supernaturalism, and metaphysics.<sup>4</sup> Organized religion here refers to the institution of religion with a dogma and hierarchy of authority which mediates between the individual and the divine. Ronald Giere provides us with an easy summary of the distinctions between naturalism and supernaturalism:

Ontologically, naturalism implies the rejection of supernaturalism. Traditionally this has meant primarily the rejection of any deity which stands outside nature as creator or actor. Positively, naturalists hold that reality, including human life and society, is exhausted by what exists in the causal order of nature. Epistemologically, naturalism implies the rejection of all forms of a priori knowledge, including that of higher-level principles of epistemic validation. Positively, naturalists claim that all knowledge derives from human interactions with the natural world. (Giere, 308)

There are two versions of metaphysics in play. One, against which I place Emerson, is Platonic. This is the type described by Dewey which identifies reality as an ideal realm beyond human experience. In other words, it maintains that human experience and the chaos of the natural world around us are devoid of capital R-reality and so situate us in a realm of mere appearances. Platonic metaphysics is supernatural in that it appeals to factors that are beyond human experience.<sup>5</sup> But metaphysics can also be understood as the general science or study of being. The trick with Emerson is that his naturalism is shot-through with his own particular, eccentric religiosity, which often seems to be or to suggest the supernatural. How are we to understand the position and existence of his "Over-Soul" in (and possibly in relation to) nature? My answer will turn on Emerson's insistence that religion is best practiced at first hand, that dogma is best translated into individual experience, and that the ultimate authority is the individual. This is what I mean by the naturalization of religion; and this process is at the heart of the general reconstruction that continues with James and Dewey and provides an answer to those hesitant to grant Emerson pride of place in classical American philosophy.

Even those who reject Emerson's literary value or his lasting influence on American letters recognize that he initiated some new Ameri-

can philosophy. Some do this with great hesitation. John Updike asks, “Is there not something dim at the center of his reputation, something fatally faded about the works he has left us?”<sup>6</sup> He continues:

We have been superbly exhorted, but to what effect? A demonstration of wit has been made, but somewhat to the stupefaction of our own wits. There is this awkwardness in Emerson’s present reputation: what we like about him is not what is important, and what *is* important we do not much like. Emerson the prophet of the new American religion seems cranky and dim; what we like is the less ethereal and ministerial Emerson, the wry, observant, shrewd, skeptical man of this world. (Updike, 164–165)

The division Updike draws between Emerson as a religious figure and Emerson as a critic has been at the core of many debates surrounding the inheritances of Emerson and the value of his overall estate. Updike is not alone in preferring Emerson the cultural critic. Harold Bloom famously offers an Emerson stripped of his religious trappings and central to American intellectual traditions:

Emerson is a critic and essayist who based his work on observation of himself and of American experience. He is not a transcendental philosopher. Emerson is the mind of our climate; he is the principal source of the American difference in poetry and criticism and in pragmatic postphilosophy. He was to his contemporaries the true prophet of an American kind of charisma, and founded the actual American religion, which is Protestant without being Christian. (Bloom 1984, 19, 20)

Bloom carries with him Giamatti’s Emerson: “The enigma of grief in Emerson, after all, may be the secret cause of his strength, of his refusal to mourn for the past. Self-reliance, the American religion he founded, converts solitude into a firm stance against history, including personal history” (Bloom 1984, 22). While it would be easy to take Bloom’s argument as nothing more than a bold overstatement, it does resound in more recent interpretations of Emerson. He is the father of modern American thought, the one figure responsible for kick-starting America’s contributions to arts and letters; and, for Bloom and others, he is best read as a secular intellectual, a Protestant who is not Christian.

One of the most influential and recent attempts to make this argument is George Kateb’s *Emerson and Self-Reliance*. Kateb’s admission of trouble with Emerson’s religiosity is worth citing at length:

Emerson wants to compel things to speak in a certain way: to owe allegiance to their divine source and to acknowledge that they are only details in a story that is greatly more than just a story about themselves. We thus enlarge the point to say that Emerson is ravenously

religious. Anything in the world—whether a particular thing or a general idea or a durable phenomenon—matters and is beautiful or sublime only if seen and thought of as part of a designed, intentionally coherent totality; indeed as an emanation of divinity. At least it *seems* to be the case that Emerson's religiousness dominates his receptivity. It is a horror to say so, but it may be rather wasteful to study Emerson unless one shares his religiousness. I repressed this thought until rather late. I still cannot quite believe it. One is right to resist it at the start, but eventually one finds the thought so persistent that it must be dealt with, even if we lose Emerson in the process. (Kateb, 65)

Kateb's suggestion that one might need to share Emerson's religiousness should send shivers down the spine of any scholar of Religious Studies. Does one really need to be *religious* (or Emersonian) to appreciate Emerson? Is Emerson himself, *ravenously religious*? And what does this mean? Does he, in fact, recognize a divine (and causal) source, which stands over and against human existence?

For Kateb there is a way out: he believes that "the danger can [and should] be faced down. A delayed dealing with it can be vindicated. Emerson's religiousness is probably reducible to the effort to make the natural and human world look human, only human, which means legible and satisfactory" (Kateb, 65). This possibility runs into the face of the "designed, intentionally coherent totality" which supposedly marks Emerson's universe. Kateb's argument is often difficult to follow, even for himself. He tries to boil down Emerson, reducing out the 'religious' element: "The world can be free of divinity and still be significant, and therefore satisfy the mind, provided the world is looked at with wonder. And Emerson gives many hints along the way that this is his great purpose—and it is not religious. I am not certain of what I have just said, but close enough to certain" (Kateb, 66). Kateb seems to conclude that although Emerson's work is shot-through with religion or religious sentiment, he is more comfortable downplaying or ignoring it. He also suggests, though, that Emerson's goal is the recovery of a sense of wonder at the world that resonates with no religious overtones. My readings of Emerson suggests that the opposite is the case; that the sense of wonder and self-reliance depends on certain metaphysical commitments, most notably, the recognition of and encounter with the Over-soul.

Kateb does recognize a difference between Emerson's religiousness and "church religions;" but the benefits for Emerson are short lived, because both impede the kind of self-reliance Kateb desires. He asks:

Does Emersonian self-reliance rest on a metaphysical fiction? It may be life-affirming and still be as remote from truth as church religions are. It may work like a creed. Emersonian self-reliance is reliance on the nature of things metaphysically—that is, religiously—understood . . . he sincerely thought that a moral divinity permeated nature and

the world. Yet even if he did not, I doubt that he thought a complete secularism was livable—much less, that its truth, if it were true, could inspire an affirmation of life.<sup>7</sup>

Kateb dismisses Emerson's "needless religiousness" which "obscures" his otherwise "perfectly truthful account of the human mystery" (Kateb, 87). He concludes that "the enlightened mind of our age will not endure Emerson's religiousness."<sup>8</sup> It is unclear how Kateb maintains that Emerson's work (and *self-reliance*) is permeated by his religiousness and yet is best understood by extracting the religiousness from his work. Kateb conflates metaphysics with an undefined notion of religion which seems at least a bit supernatural. The needless bickering over the supposedly rival secular and religious renditions of Emerson masks a more fruitful reading of Emerson, which does not play him against himself.<sup>9</sup> In other words, Emerson remains a religious thinker, even if we want to acknowledge him as a harbinger of secular American letters.<sup>10</sup> Kateb's aversion to Emerson's religiosity blinds him to the democratic nature of the revolution in Emerson's thought, and the deep connections between his notions of self-reliance and the Over-soul.

### *Self-Reliance and the Over-Soul*

The central tension in Emerson, then, is between self-reliance and the metaphysical commitments, Kateb notes, we find at the heart of his philosophy. I believe that Emerson's peculiar notion of self-reliance requires the metaphysical commitments Kateb and others want to disavow. The essay "Self-Reliance," published as part of his first series of *Essays* in 1841, follows the same arguments found in his "Divinity School Address" and "The American Scholar." To this, Emerson adds a heavy dose of supernatural-sounding metaphysics, highlighting the question Smith puts about the supernatural-natural polarity in much of Emerson's writing. The premise of *self-reliance*, is straightforward and suggestive: "A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the luster of the firmament of bards and sages" (Emerson 1996, 259). More than simply dismissing the days of dependence, Emerson introduces light imagery and a direction, *from within*. The task, then, is one of recognizing and attending to the deeper spiritual self-reality: "This sculpture in the memory is not without preestablished harmony. The eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it might testify of that particular ray. We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents" (Emerson 1996, 260). In "The Transcendentalist," too, Emerson speaks of "this double consciousness . . . the two lives, of the understanding and of the soul" (Emerson 1996, 205–6). Why does Emerson turn to the passive, describing the divine idea and preestablished harmony we represent? And why does he label the awareness of this "unsounded centre," *self-reliance*?

One reason is that the individual first must break free of the bonds of conformity imposed by society, “in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members” (Emerson 1996, 261). In a manner reminiscent of Kierkegaard in *The Present Age*, Emerson sets self-reliance against the virtue of conformity which levels uniqueness and independence and which quashes any paths toward inwardness. Conformity involves accepting others’ moral standards and traditions (“No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this”) to the detriment of one’s own more courageous possibilities.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout this essay, Emerson returns to a stock of images and metaphors: light and sight, screens, staying close to home, depths and sources. With these, Emerson constructs a natural order which springs forth from the soulful core of the self-reliant individual. Again, though, one must be wary of placing too *active* a sense of founding the “aboriginal Self . . . that source, at once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct.” Emerson continues, “We denote this primary wisdom as Intuition, whilst all later teachings are tuitions” (Emerson 1996, 268–9). The sense of *self*, once uncovered and experienced, is both passive and active as it reveals the connection to a deeper source: “The sense of being which in calm hours rises, we know not how, in the soul, is not diverse from things, from space, from light, from time, from man, but one with them, and proceeds obviously from the same source whence their life and being also proceed. We first share the life by which things exist, and afterwards see them as appearances in nature, and forget that we have shared their cause” (Emerson 1996, 269). Perhaps the most important aspect of this recognition, philosophically, is the reduction of the noumena and phenomena to one and the same source and essence. The division between idealism and the natural world has collapsed. James, we will see, argues that there is but one substance, experience. For Emerson, this one substance is the “divine spirit.”<sup>12</sup> The passage above famously concludes, “We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity.” The measure of an individual’s virtue is not submission or supplication to this inner source, but recognition, application, and self-reorientation around this powerful revelation.

Emerson describes the moment of revelation or realization in dramatic fashion:

In the hour of vision, there is nothing that can be called gratitude, nor properly joy. The soul raised over passion beholds identity and eternal causation, perceives the self-existence of Truth and Right, and calms itself with knowing that all things go well. Vast spaces of nature, the Atlantic Ocean, the South Sea,—long intervals of time, years, centuries,—are of no account. This which I think and feel underlay every

former state of life and circumstances, as it does underlie my present, and what is called life, and what is called death. (Emerson 1996, 271)

Emerson's almost breathless prose suggests a revelatory moment set outside or above time, which dismisses or demotes "what is called" life and death to the same inconsequential ends as the oceans and history. He is keenly aware that some will "fancy it rhetoric when we speak of eminent virtue." But he refuses to back away from the self-evident truth he wishes to uncover: "This is the ultimate fact which we so quickly reach on this as on every topic, the resolution of all into the ever-blessed One. Self-existence is the attribute of the Supreme Cause, and it constitutes the measure of good by the degree in which it enters into all lower forms. All things real are so by so much virtue as they contain." The virtue Emerson describes is in knowing oneself to be one with the Supreme Cause. There is no way around admitting a full-blown case of supernaturalism. But Emerson's peculiar metaphysics comes to be known or expresses itself in nature as a form of "power." The examples Emerson uses point us back toward a notion of self-reliance which reflects a transcendental nature, but does not reduce the individual to the supernatural: "The genesis and maturation of a planet, its poise and orbit, the bended tree recovering itself from the strong wind, the vital resources of every animal and vegetable, are demonstrations of the self-sufficing, and therefore self-relying soul" (Emerson 1996, 272). How is it that Emerson at one and the same time offers a "Supreme Cause" as the grounding of every ultimate fact, and describes the recognition of this holism as self-sufficiency and self-reliance?

Perhaps, "sitting at home" in communion with "our native riches" and "in communication with our internal ocean" (instead of traveling in search of and in worship to the treasures of other lands and cultures), we have the ability to become one with "eternal causation." Emersonian naturalism stealthily admits some supernaturalism, but stealthily, even if obviously. The revelation of self-reliance is stealthily compared to a true prayer which does not "look abroad and ask for some foreign addition to come through some foreign virtue, and lose itself in endless mazes of natural and supernatural, and mediatorial and miraculous." Here I cannot help but recall Emerson's rejection of miracles and the mediation of doctrine and ritual. True prayer, rather, "is the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view. It is the soliloquy of a beholding a jubilant soul. It is the spirit of God pronouncing his works good" (Emerson 1996, 271–2). There is no paradox or irony intended by Emerson when he describes speaking alone and proclaiming the discovery of an internal ocean which in some manner transcends us. What Channing and Marsh refer to as reason is translated by Emerson into a faculty of moral intuition which aligns the individual with and opens her to the spiritual unity Emerson describes in "The Over-Soul."

In numerous passages throughout the span of his writings, Emerson refers to this faculty of intuition as the *moral sentiment*. Exercising the moral sentiment awakens one to the inner-light, internal ocean, oneness of existence, or Over-soul. A quick review of but a few of the usages of “moral sentiment” is informative.<sup>13</sup> In *Nature*, Emerson writes, “Nor can it be doubted that this moral sentiment which thus scents the air, grows in the grain, and impregnates the waters of the world, is caught by man and sinks into his soul.”<sup>14</sup> This treatment of the moral sentiment as the animating ‘stuff’ of reality recurs in “Lecture on the Times:”

It is the interior testimony to a fairer possibility of life and manners, which agitates society every day with the offer of some new amendment. If we would make more strict inquiry concerning its origin, we find ourselves rapidly approaching the inner boundaries of thought, that term where speech becomes silence, and science conscience. For the origin of all reform is that mysterious fountain of the moral sentiment in man, which, amidst the natural, ever contains the supernatural for men. That is new and creative. That is alive. That alone can make a man other than he is. Here or nowhere resides unbounded energy, unbounded power.<sup>15</sup>

Underneath all these appearances, lies that which is, that which lives, that which causes. This ever renewing generation of appearances rests on a reality, and a reality that is alive . . . That reality, that causing force is moral. The Moral Sentiment is but its other name. It makes by its presence or absence right and wrong, beauty and ugliness, genius or deprivation . . . For that reality let us stand: let us serve, and for that speak. Only as far as *that* shines through them, are these times or any times worth consideration. (Emerson, 1996, 168)

The first of these passages brings to mind Kierkegaard, and the concluding paragraphs of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. Emerson often refers to the inability of words to capture the ineffable and sublime inner nature.<sup>16</sup> Both passages suggest that self-reliance requires a harnessing of the moral sentiment which then leads to a recognition of the shared, fundamentally moral nature of self and world. *Standing for that reality* motivates all reform, all progress in society, as “the Laws, Divinity, Natural Science, Agriculture, Art, Trade, Letters, have their root in an invisible spiritual reality” (Emerson 1996, 153). Though Emerson mentions the supernatural aspect of “that mysterious fountain,” its force is found and gains expression only through human action. We are, for Emerson, both “receivers of its truth and organs of its activity.”

Some philosophical questions may quickly attach to his presentation of the *moral sentiment*. The appeal to reason and moral sense is meant to replace religious tradition and the training it provides the believer’s conscience or mind. One might ask whether Emerson’s

notion is not merely a vestige from the very tradition we are supposed to reject on its behalf. Furthermore, how can we establish the credentials of Emerson's moral sentiment?<sup>17</sup> Emerson's presentation of the moral sentiment, coupled with his almost continuous and thoroughgoing anti-traditionalism more than suggest that he does not find adequate cultivation of the sentiment in and through a religious tradition. The type of awareness he desires cannot be taught, and the truths of church dogma and the doctrines which flow from them only serve to distance the adherent from the essential truths Emerson wants each individual to discover. Emerson spends very little effort justifying in philosophical terms his turn toward moral intuition and the truths he claims it uncovers.<sup>18</sup> He seems to believe that the therapeutic benefit of uncovering the hidden springs or unsounded center is proof in-itself for anyone able to draw on these hidden resources.

Self-reliance is the heart of Emerson's natural religion. Self-reliance and the Over-soul are not two poles of Emerson's metaphysics: one represents a more naturalistic, anti-religious, forceful and rugged individualism; in the other, we find a composite supernatural essence, culled from some of the many religious traditions Emerson studied. Self-reliance and the Over-soul are complementary notions, both central to Emersonian thought. Each finds expression through the other. In *the hour of vision* that marks the awakening to self-reliance, the light of the "great nature in which we rest," "that Unity, that Over-soul" shines through. Such is Emerson's florid prose: "From within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things, and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all."<sup>19</sup> The same imagery we find elsewhere works through "The Over-Soul" and is used to describe this founding experience. In the opening lines, Emerson writes: "There is a depth in those brief moments which constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences." Intimately tied to this type of experience is the recognition that "Man is a stream whose source is hidden. Our being is descending into us from we know not whence" (Emerson 1996, 385). The moral sentiment, described as "primary and aboriginal," moves us "from our remote station on the circumference instantaneously to the centre of the world" (Emerson 1996, 389). It is here that one finds the Over-soul; the moral sentiment understood as the faculty of self-reliance gives voice to the inner source, or "common nature" Emerson calls "God."<sup>20</sup> This reading of Emerson as deeply metaphysically committed runs against the current of recent interpretation.

### ***Cavell: Skepticism and Perfectionism***

Perhaps the best-known modern interpreter of Emerson, Stanley Cavell has published a series of influential essays and lectures on Emersonian thought and its relation to Wittgenstein and Heidegger. Cavell sees in the turn away from the idolatrized worship of Jesus and toward what he

calls moral perfectionism, “an attempt to take over, or mask, or say secularize, a religious responsibility” (Cavell 1990, 54). He suggests that “the essential way of envisioning our growth, from the inside, is as discontinuous . . . crossing, or rather leaping, the span from one circumference to another” (Cavell, 1979, 174). For Cavell, the action is *abandonment*, the goal, *moral perfectionism*.<sup>21</sup> “Transforming oneself and one’s society” and the “struggle against false or debased moralisms” are two aspects of this same task” (Cavell 1992, 2, 13). The circle Cavell draws includes *community*. He takes the *immense intelligence* of “Self-Reliance” to be an allusion to, or fantasy of, our shared language” and not “an allusion to God or to the Over-Soul” (Cavell, 1989, 117). Moral perfectionism requires an inner transformation and a gathering; or, this inner transformation is insufficient. Emerson’s idealism seems less and less solipsistic, and more democratic and pluralistic. Cavell is fond of Emerson’s expression we find in “Experience,” *this new yet unapproachable America* (Emerson, 1996, 485):

In *Nature* Emerson is taking the issue of skepticism as solvable or controllable whereas thereafter he takes its unsolvability to the heart of his thinking. At the close of *Nature* we are to ‘know then that the world exists for you,’ and the image of ‘the bark of Columbus near[ing] the shore of America’ teaches us that the universe is the property of every individual in it and shines for us. Whereas by the close of “Experience” we learn that ‘the true romance which the world exists to realize will be the transformation of genius into practical power,’ which says that the world exists as it were for its own reasons, and a new America is said to be unapproachable. Why is this new America said to be yet unapproachable? First, it is unapproachable if he is already there, but unable to experience it, hence to know or tell it; or unable to tell it, hence to experience it. Second, finding a nation is not managed by a landfall; a country must be peopled, and nation speaks of birth. There is no nation if it has only one inhabitant. Third, this new America is unapproachable by a process of continuity, if to find it is indeed to be born again, that is to say, suffer conversion, conversion is to be turned around, reversed, and that seems to be a matter of *discontinuity*. (Cavell 1998, 79, 91)

The apparent transformation of Emerson between *Nature* and “Experience” has fueled much speculation. Cavell’s interpretation is particularly helpful. In *Nature*, Emerson writes “nature wears the colors of true spirit.” “The whole of nature is a metaphor of the mind.” And, famously: “Nature never wears a mean appearance” (Emerson, 1996, 11, 24, 9). In “Experience,” the universe still “wears our color.” We “animate what we see.” There is in nature “that which is its own evidence” and “that in us which changes not . . . an unbounded substance” and “ineffable cause” (Emerson, 1996, 473, 475, 485). Much has been

made of the impact Emerson's son's death had on him. I wonder, though, if the biographical is too often overplayed.<sup>22</sup> Emerson's basic metaphysical assumptions seem consistent. Cavell argues that in *Nature* the universe exists for us, shines for us, while "Experience" shows a distant nature, beyond possible experience, unapproachable. This is often seen as his sceptical period.<sup>23</sup>

Stephen Whicher introduces "Experience" in this same light:

Man is promised the world—a promise perpetually renewed and never kept. Comparing the claims of faith with the observed facts, Emerson finds certain radical discrepancies. As a result, something recalling the scepticism that prompted his early doubts of 'Rational Christianity' rises to question their solution in transcendentalism. His acceptance of limitations precipitates a basic adjustment of belief. The chief testament of this newly empirical Emerson is the essay 'Experience.' (Whicher, 111)

Whicher argues that for Emerson, Nature is a reality which can never be known, from which we are essentially cut off (Whicher, 115). Whicher emphasizes the passages in "Experience" which describe the illusory quality of nature: "Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion;" "Life itself is a bubble and a skepticism, and a sleep within a sleep" (Emerson, 1996, 473, 481).

But Emerson has never made claims that one could encompass nature, as in *understanding* her. The greater metaphysical distance is but a more difficult realization, dependent on mood and temperament. The passage in Emerson introduced with *dream delivers us to dream*, continues:

Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and, as we pass through them, they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus. We animate what we can, and we see only what we animate. Nature and books belong to the eyes that see them. It depends on the mood of the man, where he shall see the sunset or the fine poem. There are always sunsets, and there is always genius; but only a few hours so serene that we can relish nature or criticism. The more or less depends on structure or temperament. Temperament is the iron wire on which the beads are strung. (Emerson, 1996, 473–474)

Even with the flux of nature, the *stream of experience*, or temperament, Emerson still holds on to "that in us which changes not . . . Fortune, Minerva, Muse, Holy Ghost, these are quaint names, too narrow to cover this unbounded substance . . . Underneath the inharmonious and trivial particulars, is a musical perfection, the Ideal journeying always with us, the heaven without rent or seam . . . a new and excellent region of being"

(Emerson 1996, 485, 484). Cavell may be wrong to emphasize discontinuities and skepticism. Marsh culls the difference between the spiritual and natural from Kant's understanding/reason divide. He then correlates two types of individuals with each essence: On one side, the individual is pre-determined and irresponsible; on the other, we find free-will, responsibility, courage. Cavell's error may be in dislocating the metaphysical commitments Emerson finds necessary for his own notion of self-reliance. Skepticism may not be the order of the day. For Cavell, the place to look for clarification is Emerson's essay "Fate."<sup>24</sup>

In *The Conduct of Life*, a late work, published in 1860, Emerson turns from the question of "Experience," "where do we find ourselves" to a 'moral' question, "how shall I live?" (Emerson 1996, 471, 769). This question assumes (say, against the Calvinists for whom Emerson asks "what could *they* do?") that we are able to do something, to make a decision or many decisions, to direct our lives. Here though, we run headlong into conflict with Nature's seeming coldness and hardness, the problem of nature-as-providence:

Nature is no sentimentalist,—does not cosset or pamper us. We must see that the world is rough and surly, and will not mind drowning a man or a woman; but swallows your ship like a grain of dust. The cold, inconsiderate of persons, tingles your blood, benumbs your feet, freezes a man like an apple. The diseases, the elements, fortune, gravity, lightening, respect no persons. The way of Providence is a little rude. (Emerson 1996, 771)

There is no greater distance between an individual (and her moral sentiment) and nature in Emerson than expressed here. The list of natural disasters which follows is alarming ("At Lisbon, an earthquake killed men like flies. At Naples . . . ten thousand persons were crushed . . .").<sup>25</sup> In the end, the limitations seem harsh and inevitable. Emerson writes: "every spirit makes its house; but afterwards the house confines the spirit." As readers of Emerson, we are led to wonder if the freedom of self-reliance has given way to the pre-determinations of fate. It seems impossible to enjoy the almost-Romantic powers of the moral sentiment when faced with the force of circumstance: "Once we thought, positive power was all. Now we learn, that negative power, or circumstance, is half. Nature is the tyrannous circumstance. . . The book of Nature is the book of Fate" (Emerson 1996, 772, 775). We might ask, as Wordsworth does in "Intimations," "Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?"<sup>26</sup> The expanding circles of our open horizon are now ringed by necessity as by fate (Emerson 1996, 778).

Fate, though, finds its balance in power and "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."<sup>27</sup> The power of free-

dom is “as savage in resistance” as the brute forces of Fate. In the end, the “revelation of Thought takes man out of servitude into freedom” along the same path that self-reliance follows toward the Over-soul:

We rightly say of ourselves, we were born, and afterward we were born again, and many times. We have successive experiences so important, that the new forgets the old . . . The day of days, the great day of the feast of life, is that in which the inward eye opens to the Unity in things, to the omnipresence of law;—sees that what is must be, and ought to be, or is the best. This beatitude dips from on high down on us, and we see. It is not in us so much as we are in it. (Emerson 1996, 781)

Thinking back on the distinction Marsh and Coleridge (and Kant) draw between reason and Nature, I wonder if Emerson has turned back toward a less romantic notion of nature, and a more rationalistic understanding and presentation of the relationship between an individual and the divine. The “inward eye” and the “Unity in things” does not recall the spirit of the transparent eyeball passage. “Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky” and the return to the “perpetual youth” of the woods might not be necessary to provoke the “return to reason and faith” of which he speaks in *Nature* (Emerson 1996, 10). There is at the very least an ambiguity about the presentation of nature in Emerson. It both “always wears the colors of the spirit” and *is no sentimentalist*. What had seemed a certainty, that Emerson found in nature a harmony with the individual’s moral sentiment, whether a reflection of it, or its own moral or even divine essence, now seems less clear.

What is certain, however, is the therapeutic possibility of the revelation of the Over-soul at the core of the self. In *Nature*, “a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at whatever period soever of life, is always a child;” In “Fate,” *the new forgets the old* . . . and we are born again (Emerson 1996, 11). For Emerson, “whoever has had experience of the moral sentiment cannot choose but believe in unlimited power” (Emerson 1996, 782–783). Cavell wants to reduce Emerson to a philosopher of everyday language, fitting well with his Wittgenstein and Heidegger. The work of achieving the “unattained self” is described in terms of language alone, as a task of moving beyond the metaphysical.<sup>28</sup> I maintain that ‘going metaphysical,’ even supernatural (even if we read the Over-soul as something more rational than natural), is necessary for the full disclosure of self-reliance. Cavell finds in Emerson a “recovery of the ordinary,” where I suggest a recovery of the sublime (Cavell 1989, 35).

The tension or ambiguity remains between a nature shot through with divinity or some aspect of morality, and one which receives its sentiment solely as a reflection of individual power. If nature does not participate in the divine, it is difficult to understand what Emerson means

when he repeats that we find ourselves in the lap of immense intelligence. We may move beyond this problem if we concentrate on the experience of the moral sentiment.

Stanley Cavell has already asked “what’s the use of calling Emerson a pragmatist?” His own answer to this question helps to ground my argument about the Emersonian inheritances of James and Dewey:

To my mind, to understand Emerson as essentially the forerunner of pragmatism is perhaps to consider pragmatism as representing more effectively or rationally what Emerson had undertaken to bring to these shores. This is the latest in the sequence of repressions of Emerson’s thought by the culture he helped to found, of what is distinctive in that thought. To repress Emerson’s difference is to deny that America is as transcendentalist as it is pragmatist, that is in struggle with itself, at a level not articulated by what we understand as the political. (Cavell 1998, 79)

The Emersonian roots of classical American philosophy find their expression, in part, in the radical empiricism of James, and the replacement of *religion* with the *religious* and metaphysical duality with *experience* in Dewey. The reconstruction of religion which begins in earnest when Emerson leaves his pulpit, continues in the pragmatic philosophy and phenomenological psychology of James, read not as a pragmatist who ignores the transcendentalist aspects of American thought, but as one who embraces them.

### ***Stout’s Emersonian Democrat***

Jeffrey Stout’s goal in *Democracy and Tradition* is to flesh out a pragmatic ethico-political thesis which would provide a theory of truth and an account of justification solid enough for it to serve as a rival to what he calls the new traditionalism, the recent work of a group of religious philosophers and theologians (MacIntyre, Hauerwas). Stout, like Rorty and many other contemporary philosophers, refers to pragmatism and means Dewey. James appears once in passing. And, though he often refers to Emerson and Emersonians, neither the Over-soul nor the moral sentiment appear in the book. Central to Stout’s rebuttal to the argument that democracy breeds moral relativity (and does not provide an adequate foundation for the cultivation and inculcation of virtues) is his claim that “democracy . . . is a tradition” filled with “ethical substance.” He summarizes the “political vision” of his book by turning to two passages from Dewey’s *The Public and its Problems* in which Dewey identifies the difficulty of “discovering the means” for a public “to define and express its interests” (Stout 2004, 3, 6). In doing this, in giving voice to the means of democracy to voice its own interests, Stout hopes to uncover the “ethical life” of the democratic tradition. Stout places pragmatism within this tradition, writing: “Pragmatism is best

viewed as an attempt to bring the notions of democratic deliberation and tradition together in a single philosophical vision. To put the point aphoristically and paradoxically, *pragmatism is democratic traditionalism*. Less paradoxically, one could say that pragmatism is the philosophical space in which democratic rebellion against hierarchy combines with traditionalist love of virtue to form a new intellectual tradition that is indebted to both” (Stout 2004, 13).

Certainly, there are many strands of pragmatism, none more ‘legitimately pragmatic’ than another. Stout, however, identifies his rendition as “Emersonian” and locates himself in a line with Emerson, Whitman, and Dewey. Stout differentiates two “strands of American religiosity without exaggerating their differences,” the Emersonian and the Augustinian (Stout 2004, 20). He begins by pointing out the important distinction between an “Augustinian” and an “Emersonian” in terms of the location of and deference to moral, religious, or ecclesiastical authority. But the delineation of these two groups is too rough, and ultimately undermined by a move Stout does not make, and one he does: Stout underestimates the metaphysical commitments in Emersonian thought which serve to ground his philosophy; and his need to find some further justification of truth claims beyond the “warranted assertability” he finds so unsatisfying in Dewey moves him very far beyond Dewey.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps it would be more accurate to argue that Stout’s turn toward the objectivity of truth places him at odds with the forward-looking, pluralistic nature of Emersonian pragmatism. Stout takes the concerns of the new traditionalists as seriously as he does a defense of the moral possibilities, for lack of a better expression, of the Emersonian democratic tradition. I differ from him over his construction and interpretation of Emersonian democracy. He falls victim to ‘the myth of the Emersonian democrat.’

At the other end of the tradition, Stout is not satisfied with the rendition of a theory of truth he sees in Dewey. In two late chapters, “Ethics without Metaphysics” and “Ethics as a Social Practice” Stout fleshes out his pragmatic moral philosophy. Though Stout maintains, along with Dewey, that there “is no explanatory value in the notion of truth as ‘correspondence’ to the ‘real,’” and does not offer an alternative “definition of truth,” he does have strong notions of both truth and reality. Stout does not believe that we can “provide an account of [truth] turning our attention to some feature of the natural world and describing empirically in what that feature consists.” But he wants to hold on to a normative concept of truth: “Truth, or accuracy, is an objective status as well as a normative one. We attribute this status willy nilly to the beliefs we currently accept, in accordance with the acceptance use of ‘true.’ But whether our beliefs and claims actually enjoy the status of being true is not up to us” (Stout 2004, 146, 148, 254, 255).

This may very well be an argument for the transcendence of conceptual content.<sup>30</sup> If so, Stout finds himself in conflict with Dewey in more

ways than one. For Dewey, especially in *Reconstruction*, the meaning of ideas, the content of claims, must always respond to new needs and contexts. He explicitly applies this to the realm of moral philosophy. Dewey writes: "It has been repeatedly suggested that the present limit of intellectual reconstruction lies in the fact that it has not as yet been seriously applied in the moral and social disciplines. Would not this further application demand precisely that we advance to a belief in a plurality of changing, moving, individualized goods and ends, and to a belief that principles, criteria, laws are intellectual instruments for analyzing individual or unique situations?" (Dewey 1934, 162–163). Stout substitutes the cart for the horse. Worse, his argument for the transcendence of truth(s) sets him at odds with the Emersonian tradition he embraces.

Stout admits his own pragmatism is "modest," but we may ask if he is pragmatic, now, in the way Royce was pragmatic. Stout's need for a weighty conception of truth to use in debate with the new traditionalists, moves him well beyond the Emerson-James-Dewey arc. His mistake, if I can call it that, mimics exactly what Josiah Royce gets wrong about James and Dewey's claims on truth. For Royce, a pragmatist who believes the theory of evolution is not a "pure pragmatist." Royce asks:

How, then, can this belief in evolution,—a belief which is a mere instance of your pragmatism,—lend back any of its borrowed authority to furnish a warrant for your belief in the very doctrine called pragmatism, a belief which you presuppose in expressing your evolutionary creed? But, on the other hand, if you say: 'The doctrine of evolution, as a universally valid result of modern science, is to be accepted, not in the pragmatist's sense at all, but because this doctrine, whether we happen to need to believe it or not, is true'; well—then you have once for all either abandoned, or else have profoundly modified, your pragmatism. (Royce 1904, 128–9)

Like Royce, Stout wants to move beyond a notion of truth which holds for the moment and to provide for certain claims "an authority which is not of the moment." Royce argues that anyone who believes his judgment to be true "implicitly" also believes that there are other perspectives on this same judgment or idea, and that each "ought to agree with, to supplement, to enlarge, and to confirm the other." In order to be a "truth-asserting consciousness," one may very well carry forward these assumptions. The problem with Royce's argument is that it purposefully misdefines the 'pure pragmatist's' notion of truth. It is not clear at all that Dewey, for example, would contradict himself by claiming that the theory of evolution offered the best explanation available for a given set of data . . . and could therefore be said to be true. For Royce, truth claims rely on a transcendental point of view which "harmonizes" all of the various points of view, and provides the force behind the "ought" of our judgments (Royce 1904, 133, 136, 141).

Perhaps Stout is leaning toward Royce's understanding of the function of a social infinite. Stout may be offering a theory of ethics without a realistic metaphysics, but he does seem to need something transcendental in order to verify or justify any and every truth.

Stout clarifies his position, and articulates a central aspect of his project, at the end of the chapter: "Pragmatism comes into conflict with theology in ethical theory mainly at those points where someone asserts that the truth-claiming function of ethics depends, for its *objectivity*, on positing a transcendent and perfect being. Metaphysics asserts the need and then posits the divine explainer to satisfy it. Pragmatism questions the need and then doubts the coherence of the explanation" (Stout 2004, 268). I have already pointed out, as Stout does repeatedly, that Dewey's "warranted assertability" is insufficient for Stout's purposes. Stout, like the new traditionalists, leans on something metaphysical—even if not divine—in order to fulfill his claim. Here, his move beyond Dewey becomes a bridge too far, when he reaches for a form of objectivity which would serve to ground his notion of truth. Stout's pragmatism does not question the need for morally valid obligations, it simply replaces the appeal to a divine source of authority for those obligations.

In *Reconstruction*, Dewey takes to task those who believe that "morals demand immutable, extra-temporal principles, standards, norms, ends, as the only assured protection against moral chaos." The difference with Stout comes when Dewey argues in defense of the relative, or "relational universality:"

The actual conditions and occasions of human life differ widely with respect to their comprehensiveness in range and in depth of penetration. To see why such is the case, one does not have to depend upon a scientifically exploded theory of control from the outside and above by self-moved and self-moving forces. On the contrary, theory began to count in the sciences . . . when this attitude of dogmatism was replaced by the use of hypotheses in conducting experimental observations to bind concrete facts together in systems of increasing temporal-spatial extent. The *universality* that belongs to scientific theories is not that of inherent content fixed by God or Nature, but of range of applicability—of capacity to take events out of their apparent isolation so as to order them into systems which prove they are alive by the kind of change which is *growth*. From the standpoint of scientific inquiry nothing is more fatal to its right to obtain acceptance than a claim that its conclusions are final and hence incapable of a development that is other than mere quantitative extension. (Dewey 1957, xiii, xv–xvi)

For Dewey, we might say, the ongoing discussion is far more important than any particular conclusions. In place of Stout's notion of objective

truth, Dewey holds to ‘best accounts’ for a given time and place. In *Reconstruction*, as James had done before, Dewey turns away from the power of Reason and the need for and appeal to principles, and sets about making “claims for experience as a guide in science and moral life which the older empiricists did not and could not make for it” (Dewey 1957, 78). In the long passage cited above, Dewey situates himself firmly in the kind of empirical philosophy James espouses which sees the world as plastic and indeterminate. This metaphysical position is closely linked by Dewey to a “logical reconstruction,” and, eventually, a political argument which sees the threat of justification, or the inevitable consequences of an attention to it, as an obstacle to the kind of democratic culture Dewey admires and demands.

Dewey’s concern is not with how truths are verified, but with how well certain ideas reflect and improve on the needs of the present (if anything, underscoring his *realist* tendencies). Truth, for Dewey, is synonymous with *utility*, but also with *valid* and *good*. If an idea “actually functions,” it is true. The important thing is the testing, and the responsiveness of the idea to the need it fulfills. Or, “to generalize the recognition that the true means the verified and means nothing else places upon men the responsibility for surrendering political and moral dogmas, and subjecting to the test of consequences their most cherished prejudices. Such a change involves a great change in the seat of authority and the methods of decision in society” (Dewey 1957, 157, 158–9, 160). We should take Stout seriously when he describes his approach as a “*modest pragmatism* [which] rejects any form of pragmatism that proposes, immodestly and unwisely, to reduce truth to some form of coherence, acceptance, or utility” (Stout 2004, 251).

It may be the case that Dewey and Stout are not involved in the same conversation, or that their interests are more different than their ideas contradictory. But Dewey does engage the problem of what he calls “moral reconstruction.” For Dewey, the “need in morals is for specific methods of inquiry and of contrivance” and not for “general conceptions” and universal claims. He is engaged in a discussion of moral philosophy, but from the demand side, not the side of supply. He, like James, takes on the purpose or goal of meliorism. Here the need of truth is the need for results. Dewey writes, “Inquiry, discovery take the same place in morals that they have come to occupy in sciences of nature. Validation, demonstration become experimental, a matter of consequences” (Dewey 1957, 170, 174). Dewey is not afraid to speak in favor of—as Stout does throughout *Democracy and Tradition*—a democratic philosophy which involves “change” and a sensitivity to the needs of every member of a society, especially the neediest.

What I see as the need for some version of objectivity in Stout runs headlong into Dewey’s anti-dogmatic critique of the epistemic and religious accounts of truth. This may be ironic, given Stout’s identification

with the Emersonians over the Augustinians on the very question of dogma and authority. Dewey's goal is the adjustment of philosophy (or, its reconstruction) to the needs of society. Stout seems to be engaged in a very different project which entails an epistemological tradition Dewey has long abandoned. Like Stout, Dewey turns to a discussion of social philosophy at the critical stage of his argument about reconstruction. But Dewey is not afraid of a "certain amount of overt confusion and irregularity. Socially as well as scientifically," he argues, "the great thing is not to avoid mistakes but to have them take place under conditions such that they can be utilized to increase intelligence in the future" (Dewey 1957, 208). This point of departure between Stout and Dewey may be a central meeting-ground for Dewey and James. In *The Will to Believe* James tosses aside the concern for shunning error and the drive toward objective certitude. The testing of a moral question does not yield an absolute and objective answer; it yields an approach or a willingness to engage in an ongoing enterprise in which nothing is certain but the effort. In "Pragmatism and Religion" James speaks of the "saving possibilities of the many" and the "validity of possibility" (James 1975, 134, 135). Pluralism, as a philosophical position, provides an alternative both to absolutism and nihilism, without engaging in the apologetic epistemology Stout believes he needs to make his case with the new traditionalists.

The discussion of truth and verification is brought by Stout in support of an early argument in the book that democratic culture can and does foster the virtue of piety. Stout emphasizes the virtue of piety "because this has been central to the broader debate over religion, ethics, and political community:"

Piety, in this context, is not to be understood primarily as a *feeling*, expressed in acts of devotion, but rather as a *virtue*, a morally excellent aspect of character. It consists in just or appropriate response to the sources of one's existence and progress through life. Family, political community, the natural world, and God are all said to be sources on which we depend, sources to be acknowledged appropriately. Emersonians and Augustinians agree that piety, in this sense, is a crucial virtue, and they share an interest in clarifying the proper relationship between civic and religious piety. But they disagree over how the sources should be conceived and what constitutes appropriate acknowledgment of our dependence on them." (Stout 2004, 20)

Natural piety in Dewey's *A Common Faith* is a rather straightforward affair, and quite different from what Stout offers. As he does with the concepts of religious experience and God, Dewey translates piety into its function. *Natural* piety simply refers to the function of the traditional religious notion of piety stripped of its supernaturalism. Natural piety, then, "is not of necessity either a fatalistic acquiescence in natural happenings or a romantic idealization of the world. It may rest upon a

just sense of nature as the whole of which we are parts, while it also recognizes that we are parts that are marked by intelligence and purpose, having the capacity to strive by their aid to bring conditions into greater consonance with what is humanly desirable” (Dewey 1934, 25). For Dewey, piety is less a virtue and more of a feeling whose cash value is found in and through actions which work to better the conditions of existence.

Stout refers some twenty times, in the span of one short chapter, to “the sources of our existence and progress through life.” He is certainly correct in arguing that Emersonians and Augustinians disagree over how the sources should be conceived and what constitutes appropriate acknowledgment of our dependence on them” (Stout 2004, 20). Unfortunately, Stout never identifies what Emerson, Whitman, or Dewey believe these sources to be. It may be the case that these three Emersonians, acknowledge different sources in distinct ways.

### *Conclusion*

Stout points to Cavell’s notion of perfectionism as an example of Emersonian “*ethical striving*: This is no doctrine of leveling, as far as virtue is concerned. It is democratic in its conviction that each soul has a vocation to ascend, and realistic in its recognition that most persons—perhaps moderns most of all—are content to remain mired in the conformity of the masses. Emersonian perfectionism involves no hesitation to call excellence, mediocrity, and vice by their correct names.”<sup>31</sup> This portrayal of Emerson is valid and helpful to Stout. But his repetition of “the sources of our existence and progress through life” demands a fuller and more accurate presentation of Emersonian perfectionism, one that does justice to those very sources.

It is certainly the case that Emersonian self-reliance involves acknowledgement of a dependence on a source, and one which Stout and others ignore. The conclusion of Stout’s first chapter is telling:

What is it about a human being that freedom of conscience honors? For that matter, what is it about a human being that the prohibition of murder honors, or the prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment? Christians [Augustinian democrats] answer these questions by telling a story about souls created in the image of God. Emerson and Whitman also often talk about souls and about something divine or wondrous that can be discerned in a human being. They are self-consciously waxing poetic at those moments. (Stout 2004, 41)

If my reading of Emerson is sound, there is a necessary and substantial relationship between self-reliance and the Over-soul. Self-reliance is not a first example or expression of a rugged American individualism. It is not necessary to throw the metaphysical out with the supernatural in an attempt to limit the appeal of the Emersonian democrat to some-

thing beyond herself, because the turn to experience in Emerson (which we find in James and Dewey) serves to shift authority away from a religious elite and to re-center it in the individual. On my reading, Emerson relies on the transcendental power (as he understands it) of reason, a notion he inherits from Kant through Coleridge through Marsh, which he translates into the moral sentiment, a force which sees into the life of things, and awakens him to the spring of life he calls the Over-soul. For Emerson, piety does entail the acknowledgement of the source of existence which itself does not threaten the loss of individual autonomy.

In an early essay on Emerson, Cavell describes the movement of “onward thinking” in “Circles” as “discontinuous” and one which involves a kind of “abandonment.” Cavell understands abandonment in Emerson to be synonymous with “enthusiasm” or “forgetting ourselves, together with what he calls leaving or relief or quitting or release or shunning or allowing or deliverance, which is freedom, together further with something he means by trusting or suffering” (Cavell 1979, 174–175). In all of this, even as he mentions the “inflections or images of the religious idea of The Way,” Cavell never acknowledges the possibility that perfectionism requires or involves a process of centering in which the self one leaves behind may not be as important as the source of existence one uncovers.<sup>32</sup>

Would the metaphysical commitments Stout ignores in Emerson adequately serve as a foundation for his moral philosophy? For Emerson, James, and Dewey, there is no appeal to an absolute, as there might be for some, including perhaps the new traditionalists. The unseen order in James does have or provide some ethical function in the life of a believer. But I do not want to confuse or conflate the metaphysical with the second order reflection or movements of justification and verification Stout provides in place of relativity and warranted assertability. The wider self Emerson and James imagine is not meant to serve as a source of authority, especially in the context of a debate about virtues. In this context, Stout may very well be correct in arguing that the instrumental or hypothetical rendition of truth in Dewey is not strong enough to use against the purveyors of an ontologically-grounded presentation of the virtues. But this is exactly where the secular pragmatic tradition Stout and others embrace undermines his own project. Those unnamed sources of our existence are much more important than he acknowledges. The strand of American pragmatism I identify is not necessarily secular, sceptical, anti-realist or anti-metaphysical.

Emerson may not be a pragmatist. And James and Dewey are not full-throated Emersonians. But the similarities between these three philosophers, suggest a great deal of family resemblances. Most interpreters of classical American philosophy overemphasize Emerson’s transcendentalism and self-reliance at the expense of his more subtle religious philosophy. As James and Dewey who follow, Emerson wants

to redirect the imagination toward ideals which emanate from and through nature. Emerson is much less of an individualist than he is read to be. At the heart of his work is a natural religion or natural religiosity which lays the ground for a great many of the characteristics we find in pragmatism. James, for his part, provides a pragmatic philosophy, based on his radical empiricism, which demands a pluralistic approach to truth(s). His reconception of experience moves it beyond the traditional atomistic British empiricism, appreciating it as the material of reality, and the right content of substance of philosophy. Like Emerson, James imagines the wider self of the individual, and directs his philosophy toward the meliorism and holism which follow from such a portrait. Dewey enters the fray, steeped in Jamesian pragmatism, and directs the tradition toward a more naturalized appreciation of belief. He moves the discussion of religious experience beyond description, and toward an uncovering of the function of certain types of experience at the heart of democratic culture.

At the end of his review of Putnam's *Pragmatism: An Open Question*, Rorty argues that "anybody who wants to defend pragmatism these days has to say something pretty clear and definite about how you can be holist and anti-dualist about practically everything, and yet avoid making truth so dependent on consensus as to endanger "our realistic intuitions"—the intuitions that many contemporary philosophers think it a sacred duty to preserve inviolate" (Rorty 1996, 561). My concern is not solely with pragmatism as it reflects or projects a theory of truth to be used in an epistemological debate. Nor do I recognize any sacred duty to defend realistic intuitions which set or justify truths or truth-claims. But there is something, some type of intuition or moral sentiment in play for Emerson that we find again in James and in Dewey. In the struggle over the presentation and support of rival (interpretations of) pragmatic traditions, one has been ignored—one which emphasizes the religious aspects of classical American philosophy. This pragmatism may be the one best suited to engage those critics of American thought who find it so unable to support moral culture.

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## NOTES

1. This reading of Plato perhaps is more convenient than accurate. Iris Murdoch and many others point out that the boundaries may be more permeable or interrelated than I am taking them to be.

2. Smith 1995, 21.

3. Rorty, for instance, reads Emerson as a “philosopher of private self-creation.” See “Truth without Correspondence to Reality” in Rorty 1999.

4. Thanks to Bernard Reginster for helping me to tease out these differences.

5. See note 1.

6. Updike, 148–149. He sides with Melville who, according to Updike, skewers Emerson in the character of Mark Winsome in *The Confidence-Man*. “Winsome is portrayed as ‘with such a preternaturally cold, gemmy glance out of his pellucid blue eye, that he seemed more a metaphysical merman than a feeling man.’ As ‘coldly radiant as a prism,’ Winsome spouts Plato and mocks consistency. He is too mystical and also too practical. His philosophy is unreal, yet at the same time it serves the world’s base purposes” (Updike, 151–152).

7. Kateb, 75, 79. Kateb is personally put-off by Emerson’s religiousness, writing, “if it is maddening to think that Emerson appears to retreat from the possible radicalism of self-reliance and head toward religiousness (howsoever unorthodox), it is even more maddening to think that he may not have been able to approach radicalism except through religious inspiration. It is obvious that I find the religiousness of Emerson an impediment to my reception. I certainly do not deny that because the theory of democratic individuality commits one to the hope that a secular form of the philosophical conception of self-reliance can gain acceptance among ordinary persons, the fact of pervasive religiousness remains a tremendous problem” (Kateb, 81).

8. Kateb, 91. This argument is reminiscent of Emerson’s own dismissal of the orthodoxies of Unitarianism. Leo Marx shares a concern that Kateb errs when he dismisses the “vital religious dimension of the American doctrine of individuality” (See Marx, 598).

9. Henry Levinson offers an interesting alternative, which, while placing Emerson in a religious line, exposes the “republican” tendencies of his thought:

Society and solitude; the tragic and the comic; impotence and assertion, or fate and freedom; prophetic reform and spiritual contemplation; the grace of communion and the cant of religion; American democracy as divine life at first hand and as the land of the ‘deal alive’ condemned to life at second hand—all these conflicts are Emersonian. In fact these Emersonian anxieties are themselves grounded in older dialectics that inform the thought and practice of Emerson’s Protestant forebears, whether republican or theocratic. The tensions I am thinking about descend from Reformed Christian preoccupations with grace and law, with the view that moral practices, while indispensable, do not circumscribe personal life in its most divine moments; that personal equanimity, in some sense, requires letting go of moral propriety understood as exclusively definitive of human life at its best;

that genuine spirituality calls for some sort of solitary new birth or re-creation that reveals simultaneously the limitations and genuine functions of the social conventions we inherit, on the one hand, and the lovely and lovable character of mortal life on the other; that doing well neither adds up to nor secures being well; that personal well-being can occur, but it cannot be achieved because its happening is gratuitous. (Levinson 1992, 8)

10. One other possibility has been suggested recently, namely that Emerson is best viewed as a radical restorationist, in line with Joseph Smith. John Duffy makes this argument, as part of his effort to avoid the rival religious and secular readings of Emerson. He notes that the claim to secularity usually follows from an “interested” reading of Emerson and “implies that he situates himself over against religion—which is true in the sense that Emerson-the-radical-restorationist believes the Christian tradition to be irredeemably corrupt. But that is not the sense that the critics who read Emerson as a secularist have in mind” (Duffy, 242). Duffy’s strongest argument is as follows:

If Emerson is a radical restorationist, then the secular/religious binary collapses. In the radical restorationist model, the terms ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ do not demarcate opposing impulses in Emerson’s thought. Rather, the label ‘religious’ can be applied to Emerson’s radical restorationism inasmuch as the restoration has its origins in the Christian tradition, or inasmuch as restorationism is a mode of Christian discourse. The label ‘secular’ can be applied to the degree that Emerson’s version of radical restorationism adopts a trajectory that we typically think of as ‘secular’—i.e., it parallels the trajectory of the Romantics and the German philosophers on whose work Emerson drew. (Duffy, 244)

11. Emerson 1996, 262. James, too, speaks of the courage and tough-mindedness demanded by his brand of empiricism.

12. Emerson 1996, 269. In “Compensation,” Emerson writes:

These appearances indicate that the universe is represented in every one of its particles. Every thing in nature contains all the powers of nature. Every thing is made of one hidden stuff; as the naturalist sees one type under every metamorphosis . . . (289)

13. In the “Divinity School Address” alone, Emerson turns to the sentiment no fewer than five times. One key passage reads: “The moral traits which are all globed into every virtuous act and thought,—in speech, we must sever, and describe or suggest by painful enumeration of many particulars. Yet, as this sentiment is the essence of all religion . . . The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul” (Emerson 1996, 76). And: “Christianity destroys the power of preaching, by withdrawing it from the exploration of the moral nature of man, where the sublime is, where are the resources of astonishment and power.” “There are resources in us on which we have not drawn” (Emerson 1996, 90).

In “Compensation” (*Essays: First Series*), Emerson describes the human soul as the moral sentiment: “Thus is the universe alive. All things are moral. That soul, which within us is a sentiment, outside of us is a law” (Emerson 1996, 289).

It appears, as well, in *Representative Men*.

“Moral sentiment” is synonymous with “religious sentiment,” which also appears frequently in Emerson’s writings. See Emerson 1996, 78 (from “The Divinity School Address”): “The perception of this law of laws awakens in the mind a sentiment which we call the religious sentiment, and which makes our highest happiness.”

14. Emerson 1996, 29. Dylan Thomas writes of an analogous, active moral force in “The Force That Through The Green Fuse Drives The Flower,” which reads, in part:

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower  
 Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees  
 Is my destroyer.  
 And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose  
 My youth is bent by the same wintry fever

The force that drives the water through the rocks  
 Drives my red blood; that dries the mouthing streams  
 Turns mine to wax.  
 And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins  
 How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks.

15. Emerson 1996, 160. A similar concept, stripped of any reference to the supernatural, and based at the level of community, finds expression in Dewey’s notions of moral faith and moral ideals.

16. A few of the many passages on silence in “Over-Soul:” “The soul answers never by words, but by the thing itself that is inquired after” (393); and, “The action of the soul is oftener in that which is felt and left unsaid, than in that which is said in any conversation” (390–1).

17. Bernard Reginster has raised these particular questions. Cavell’s notion of (Emersonian) moral perfectionism includes an answer to this line of questions: “The results of its moral thinking are not the results of moral reasoning, neither of a calculation of consequences issuing in a judgment of value or preference, nor of a testing of a given intention, call it, against a universalizing law issuing in a judgment of right” (Cavell 1990, 55).

18. In “The Over-Soul” (*Essays: First Series*), Emerson offers one possible reply:

The soul is the perceiver and revealer of truth. We know truth when we see it, let skeptic and scoffer say what they choose . . . ‘How do you know it is truth, and not an error of your own?’ We know truth when we see it, from opinion, as we know when we are awake that we are awake. It was a grand sentence of Emanuel Swedenborg, which would alone indicate the greatness of that man’s perception,—‘It is no proof of a man’s understanding to be able to confirm whatever he pleases; but to be able to discern that what is true is true, and that what is false is false, this is the mark and character of intelligence. (Emerson 1996, 391)

19. Emerson 1996, 387. Elsewhere in the essay, Emerson emphasizes this direction of wisdom (395).

20. Emerson 1996, 390. Though Marsh was critical of Emerson’s un-rigorous self-reflection (see Nicolson), he, too, advocated a turn inward in order to turn “upward:” “It is by self-inspection, by reflecting upon the mysterious grounds of our own being, that we can alone arrive at any rational knowledge of the central and absolute ground of all being” (Marsh, 492–493).

21. See Cavell, 1979, 175:

The idea of abandonment contains what the preacher in Emerson calls “enthusiasm” of the New Englander in him calls “forgetting ourselves,” together with what he calls leaving or relief or quitting or release or shunning or allowing or deliverance, which is freedom, together with something he means by trusting or suffering. This departure, such setting out, is, in our poverty, what hope consists in, all there is to hope for; it is the abandoning of despair, which is otherwise our condition.

He takes the term abandonment from Emerson's "Circles." Cavell mentions the "abandoning of despair;" since Santayana, many commentators have offered Emerson as an optimist—one who ignores evil in the world—often to his detriment. I tend to side with Cavell. Hope on Emerson's part should not be taken as naiveté.

Though I find Cavell to be helpful, I prefer to emphasize *dislocation* and *rediscovery* instead of abandonment. One possible connection would be in the field of mystical religious experience, suggesting that Emerson, as in his passage on the transparent eyeball, is offering a mystical or ecstatic experience of nature in which one is liberated from the world of working ("I am nothing") and united with the force of nature ("the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me").

22. See O'Keefe's "Experience': Emerson on Death."

23. See Richardson, 400–403.

24. See "Emerson, Coleridge, Kant," Cavell 1990. Again, Cavell translates Emerson into his text, and weaves an argument about ordinary language philosophy out of this text:

Now it says openly that language is our fate. It means, hence, that not exactly prediction, but diction, is what puts us in bonds, that with each word we utter we emit stipulations, agreements we do not know and do not want to know we have entered, agreements we were always in, that were in effect before our participation in them. Our relation to our language—to the fact that we are subject to expression and comprehension, victims of meaning—is accordingly a key to our sense of our distance from our lives, of our sense of the alien, of ourselves as alien to ourselves, thus alienated. (72)

25. Compare this rendition with Santayana's reading of Transcendentalism (Santayana, 50): "Nature, for the transcendentalist, is precious because it is his own work, a mirror in which he looks at himself and says (like a poet relishing his own verses), "What a genius I am! Who would have thought there was such stuff in me?" And the philosophical egotist finds in his doctrine a ready explanation of whatever beauty and commodity nature actually has. No wonder, he says to himself, that nature is sympathetic, since I made it."

26. "Ode" opens with this same distance:

THERE was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,  
The earth, and every common sight,  
To me did seem  
Appareled in celestial light,  
The glory and the freshness of a dream.  
It is not now as it hath been of yore;—  
Turn wheresoe'er I may,  
By night or day,  
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

27. Emerson 1996, 779. The passage which introduces the (re)turn to power begins: "But Fate has its lord; limitation its limits; is different seen from above and from below; from within and from without. For, though Fate is immense, so is power, which is the other fact in the dual world, immense. If Fate follows and limits power, power attends and antagonizes Fate."

28. See Cavell 1990, 12:

In my way of reading Emerson, his passage naming the unattained but attainable self suggests two ways of reading, in one of which we are brought to recognize our own idea in his text (reading with our unattained self), in the other not (reading

with our attained self, appreciating our given opinions, learning nothing new). To recognize the unattained self is, I gather, a step in attaining it. I do not read Emerson as saying (I assume this is my unattained self asserting itself) that there is one unattained/attainable self we repetitively never arrive at, but rather that “having” “a” self is a process of moving to, and from, nexts. It is, using a romantic term, the “work” of (Emerson’s) writing to present nextness, a city of words to participate in.

and, Cavell 1990, 19:

Emerson’s invoking the world he thinks is at once to declare what I am marking as the perfectionist’s address to Utopia as to something somehow here, whose entrance is next to us, hence persistently just missed, just passed, just curbed, and so to declare that the world in question inspires or requires a particular mode of thinking . . . The association with Wittgenstein will depend on accepting what he calls “bringing words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” as a mode of thinking—evidently a counter-mode, or a mode with a counter incentive, to the thinking that denies the philosophical fatefulness of the everyday.

29. Stout is clear throughout his book that he differs from Dewey on this point. See Stout 2004, 14: “My most obvious departure from Dewey is my claim that truth is not an essentially relative concept. This is a notion that many readers of my previous writings have found hard to square with what I say in praise of Dewey’s doctrine on other topics. But I maintain that emphasizing the priority of social practices in the way pragmatism does need not prevent us from thinking of ethical discourse as an objective endeavor in which full-fledged truth-claims play an essential role.”

In the “Lexicon” of *Ethics after Babel*, Stout offers the following definition of “Truth [as] warranted assertability:” “A false theory of truth, associated with pragmatism (bad sense) and refuted by familiar cases in which we are warranted in asserting a proposition at a given time but later discover the proposition to have been false; also a snappy but misleading way of summing up the idea, characteristic of pragmatism (good sense), that seeking warranted assertability for our sentences is the only way to see truth” (298). In *Ethics*, Stout understands the bad sense of pragmatism to be when it is taken as an “epistemological position” (the good sense involves “never having to say you’re certain”) (297). In order to translate his own democratic pragmatism into a hard-and-fast moral philosophy, Stout adds a theory of verification to Dewey’s warranted assertability, thereby coming very close to translating Dewey’s progressive pragmatism into an epistemology.

30. Thanks to Michael Slater for pointing this out.

31. Stout 2004, 29. In the introduction to *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, Cavell writes, in many ways following Dewey, “There is a part of Emersonian Perfectionism’s struggle against the moralistic, here the form of moralism that fixates on the presence of ideals in one’s culture and promotes them to distract one from the presence of otherwise intolerable injustice” (Cavell 1988, 13). I do not cite this in order to make the case that Stout intends on distracting the reader from injustice. Rather, I think it is clear that Emerson struggles against all forms of moralism.

32. See Cavell 1979, 176: “The substantive disagreement with Heidegger, shared by Emerson and Thoreau, is that the achievement of the human requires not inhabitation and settlement, but abandonment, leaving. Then everything depends upon your realization of abandonment.”