


The over-soul emerson pdf

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In our Emerson discussion, Wes and Dylan didn't seem too interested in trying to figure out Emerson's religious/metaphysical views, which were drawn on in the essays we read but which were not their central feature. I think (as does Thoreau, who incidentally we're talking about next) that reading him in a secular vein is ultimately more rewarding, but my complaints about how unsatisfying Emerson's explanations of his metaphysics were by necessity just hung there in the conversation. Given that Emerson is primarily known as a transcendentalist, and that's actually supposed to mean something, this is my attempt to fill in the picture a bit with some quotes from his essay, "The Over-Soul," which was published along with "Self-Reliance" in 1841). From the first paragraph of the essay we see the foundation is supposed to be in our experience. He says that "our faith comes in moments... Yet there is a depth in those brief moments which constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences." However, he immediately then states: For this reason, the argument which is always forthcoming to silence those who conceive extraordinary hopes of man, namely, the appeal to experience, is for ever invalid and vain. We give up the past to the objector, and yet we hope. He must explain this hope. We grant that human life is mean; but how did we find out that it was mean? What is the ground of this uneasiness of ours; of this old discontent? What is the universal sense of want and ignorance, but the fine innuendo by which the soul makes its enormous claim? ...The philosophy of six thousand years has not searched the chambers and magazines of the soul. ...Man is a stream whose source is hidden. Our being is descending into us from we know not whence. So this is not ordinary phenomenology, but an appeal to interpret a certain nagging sense we have in a certain way. This is pretty typical of religion, and of course the experience radically underdetermines any particular type of religious doctrine. But as Emerson denounces religious doctrine, he's surely aware of this, and is discussing the unknowable in much the same way as Schleiermacher. But Emerson does not remain in silence, saying "we know not whence" comes our sense of something greater than the drab immediacy of material existence. The third paragraph of the essay states: The Supreme Critic on the errors of the past and the present, and the only prophet of that which must be, is that great nature in which we rest... that Unity, that Over-soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart... We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. So we've got a clear statement of the oneness of all creation here, not just the unity of people. The portions of the above paragraph that I left out for brevity indicate more the fundamentally ethical character of this oneness: ...Of which all sincere conversation is the worship, to which all right action is submission; that overpowering reality which confutes our tricks and talents, and constrains every one to pass for what he is, and to speak from his character, and not from his tongue, and which evermore tends to pass into our thought and hand, and become wisdom, and virtue, and power, and beauty. That paragraph continues: And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul. Only by the vision of that Wisdom can the horoscope of the ages be read, and by falling back on our better thoughts, by yielding to the spirit of prophecy which is innate in every man, we can know what it saith. Every man's words, who speaks from that life, must sound vain to those who do not dwell in the same thought on their own part. I dare not speak for it. My words do not carry its august sense; they fall short and cold. Only itself can inspire whom it will, and behold! their speech shall be lyrical, and sweet, and universal as the rising of the wind. Yet I desire, even by profane words, if I may not use sacred, to indicate the heaven of this deity, and to report what hints I have collected of the transcendent simplicity and energy of the Highest Law. More standard religious talk here: if you don't agree with this "experience" of oneness, with this Platonic take on beauty and virtue flowing from some fundamental metaphysical ground with which we are always in touch but which we seldom get a clear glimpse of, then you "do not dwell in the same thought," i.e. you haven't had the same esoteric, religious experience; you haven't gotten a glimpse. The appeal to "hope" earlier is not that different from an appeal to faith: you could interpret your experience of beauty and goodness as being nothing at all like the Platonic picture, e.g. you might think that our current ethics and aesthetics are the result of a long train of evolutionary accidents and semi-random cultural development, but why don't you not interpret things in that way? (See William James make this point.) Emerson says that experience "constrains us" (presumably the "us" means only those not corrupted in some unspecified way) to give an analysis involving the divine. This was too early in the Geist of religious development-before "God is dead" and all that-to fess up to the choice involved (a la Kierkegaard's leap of faith), that experience doesn't really "constrain" us to interpret the world in religious terms, that doing so is a hermeneutic strategy, and that the "overpowering reality" of the divine is only overpowering once you've implicitly accepted the religious world view. OK, so he's not trying to convince the skeptic, and faith is involved. Big deal. Maimonides falls into that category, and he still provided us with a good deal of philosophical meat to chew on. Like, what is this Over-Soul exactly? How do we interact with it? If I am you and you are me and we are altogether, why can't I read your thoughts? Or is this essay just another sermon, pretty much valueless to anyone not sharing its fundamental premise and merely inspirational (as opposed to actually enlightening) to one of the faithful? Is this just like a religious pep talk before the big game? Let's read on: ...The soul in man is not an organ, but animates and exercises all the organs; is not a function, like the power of memory, of calculation, of comparison, but uses these as hands and feet; is not a faculty, but a light; is not the intellect or the will, but the master of the intellect and the will; is the background of our being, in which they lie, — an immensity not possessed and that cannot be possessed. 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. OK, so contra Sartre, Emerson here is stating (certainly not arguing) that there is a transcendental Subject, i.e. an absolute "I" that is the one that experiences, wills, etc. So what individuates me from you? Only a different particular set of things experienced, i.e. nothing essential about the Subject at all. It would be a small leap (though still one requiring explanation which I don't see here) to venture that really there's only one Subject, one seer who sees through different eyes. But still, wouldn't we expect if that were the case to be able to more than just metaphorically see through each others' eyes? He then describes further how we only get a glimpse of this reality, yet nothing separates us from it. Then we get: The sovereignty of this nature whereof we speak is made known by its independency of those limitations which circumscribe us on every hand. The soul circumscribes all things. As I have said, it contradicts all experience. In like manner it abolishes time and space. The influence of the senses has, in most men, overpowered the mind to that degree, that the walls of time and space have come to look real and insurmountable; and to speak with levity of these limits is, in the world, the sign of insanity. Yet time and space are but inverse measures of the force of the soul. So why do we think that the Subject is independent of time and space? Because we buy some Kantian theory that says that time and space are something that our psychology adds in order to create our experience? Schopenhauer made a mistake when he concluded that because time and space (and number, etc.) are features of our experienced world, then they could not be features of the thing-in-itself that lurks behind the objects we experience. On this view, we simply can't know what the thing-in-itself is really like. Similarly, here Emerson is saying that the Subject, because it exists beyond any particular experience, can definitely be said to have different qualities than any of those experiences, that consciousness itself (as opposed to consciousness of material objects or things we think about, i.e. our individual stream of consciousness) is not temporal. I see no justification for thinking this. Emerson then talks about how inspirational intellectual work is, how art uplifts us, how the soul "has no dates, nor rites, nor persons, nor specialties, nor men." Yes, yes, I agree that all this analytical getting bogged down in particulars, much less mundane particulars, can be a drag, and that music and beautiful sunsets and all that are a necessary release for our well-being. And how does the "soul advance?" We hear that, morally, the soul rises "not into a particular virtue, but into the region of all the virtues" and that "To the well-born child, all the virtues are natural, and not painfully acquired. Speak to his heart, and the man becomes suddenly virtuous." I think these claims are just plain false, but as they're irrelevant to the metaphysics, I won't dwell on them. Here's something that sounds like Plato's Symposium: Persons are supplementary to the primary teaching of the soul. In youth we are mad for persons. Childhood and youth see all the world in them. But the larger experience of man discovers the identical nature appearing through them all. Persons themselves acquaint us with the impersonal. In all conversation between two persons, tacit reference is made, as to a third party, to a common nature. That third party or common nature is not social; it is impersonal; is God. So we have the claim that we grasp the universal through the particular (this is what getting concepts is all about), and that communication of any sort requires a common standard. The latter point raises an interesting issue. Insofar as the common standard is linguistic (or otherwise symbolic), then it's surface-level, it's an abstraction, it's not getting at the deep and inexpressible. So he can't be talking about that as the "implicit reference." More likely, he's talking about a shared life-world, or rather, the assumption (the hope!) that each one of us has that the person we're talking to (insofar as we can "relate to" him or her) has a common base of experience, i.e. "knows what we're talking about" instead of merely being competent in using the words we're using. The existentialist will stress that this feeling is an illusion, that each of us has our own, separate experience (we all die alone!). Since both he and Emerson are reacting to the same human condition, again, this seems a matter of how we interpret this same data. The data underdetermines its interpretation (of course), so that how we choose to interpret things is a matter of, well, maybe not choice, but at least some creativity. Emerson has advised us to be individuals, to not go along with the crowd or even adopt his own (Emerson's) point of view, to call it like we see it, and in following his advice, I think that both of these contrary interpretations (the world is warm and unified vs. the world is cold and isolating) are equally groundless, reflective more of the mood we're in on a given day than anything more profound. Emerson disagrees: The soul is the perceiver and revealer of truth. We know truth when we see it, let skeptic and scoffer say what they choose. Foolish people ask you, when you have spoken what they do not wish to hear, '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... In the book I read, the good thought returns to me, as every truth will, the image of the whole soul. To the bad thought which I find in it, the same soul becomes a discerning, separating sword, and lops it away. We are wiser than we know. If we will not interfere with our thought, but will act entirely, or see how the thing stands in God, we know the particular thing, and every thing, and every man. For the Maker of all things and all persons stands behind us, and casts his dread omniscience through us over things. So if you don't agree with Emerson, or are otherwise skeptical, you're "foolish" and denying the truth that is in yourself. Nice. He continues: But beyond this recognition of its own in particular passages of the individual's experience (he's talking here about good art tapping into the universal), it also reveals truth. And here we should seek to reinforce ourselves by its very presence, and to speak with a worthier, loftier strain of that advent. For the soul's communication of truth is the highest event in nature, since it then does not give somewhat from itself, but it gives itself, or passes into and becomes that man whom it enlightens; or, in proportion to that truth he receives, it takes him to itself. This is pure theology, moving to a "worthier, loftier" tone. What does it mean to say that the soul "gives itself, or passes into and becomes that man whom it enlightens"? So the soul here is no longer the "transcendental Subject," i.e. the knower who looks out of all of our eyes as we pour our cereal or look for street signs or make sure all the feces have flushed properly. The soul only "enters" us from time to time as we get a glimpse of the divine. So the starting point in talking about the soul was to explain perception, but now he's saying that it's only part of perception, leaving perception itself (and the subject of perception) unexplained. So let's be charitable and say that, yes, the individual soul is the transcendental Subject, and yes, all such Subjects are technically One, i.e. they are the Over-soul, but it's only occasionally, during moments of revelation, when we actually experience ourselves as One, as the Over-soul, and can use the metaphor in that case of it "entering into us" even though really, it's been in us all the time. So on this interpretation, Emerson is not incoherent, merely careless in his use of words. OK, so we get these glimpses, these incursions of the Divine. What do they actually tell us? The nature of these revelations is the same; they are perceptions of the absolute law. They are solutions of the soul's own questions. They do not answer the questions which the understanding asks. The soul answers never by words, but by the thing itself that is inquired after. Revelation is the disclosure of the soul. So these "questions" are non-verbal, and the answers are also non-verbal. We feel an existential yearning, turn toward the Divine, and feel better; but this is not just like taking a drug to feel better, but getting a glimpse of "Truth," of "absolute law," which doesn't just make us feel better but which justifies the feeling, which justifies our existence. But what is "Truth" if divorced from any actual claims that could be true or false? Why use the term "absolute law" when it has no clear relation to scientific law or moral law or any other kind of law? It's all a matter of being in the presence of God. How do you know that you're in the presence of God? If you have to ask, you're not there. You just know. The knowledge presents itself as self-justifying. This is garden-variety mysticism, adding nothing but a modern sheen to Taoism or Buddhism or Brahmanism and blurring the distinctions between these traditions into a generic New Age soup. Lest this be taken as a mere dismissal, I think that as a religious view, this purposeful muddiness is probably better than a doctrine of any sort, which by necessity falsifies its subject matter, which is the ineffable. In this passage near the end, he makes it clear that the point is not actually a metaphysical theory, but a kind of therapy. It's about being soothed, and empowered to let go of disappointment, and inflamed with energy to create and live: Ineffable is the union of man and God in every act of the soul. The simplest person, who in his integrity worships God, becomes God; yet for ever and ever the influx of this better and universal self is new and unsearchable. It inspires awe and astonishment. How dear, how soothing to man, arises the idea of God, peopling the lonely place, effacing the scars of our mistakes and disappointments! When we have broken our god of tradition, and ceased from our god of rhetoric, then may God fire the heart with his presence. -Mark Linssenmayer

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