

## **The Spiritual Roots of Emersonian Subjectivity and the Phenomenology of Self-Reliance**

**Christopher Morales**

University of California, Santa Barbara

During the nineteenth century, the United States underwent a period of dramatic economic progress and technological innovation, which gave rise to new ways of conceiving the good life and understanding freedom. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, sociologist Max Weber argues that modern capitalism grew alongside emergent Protestant ways of being-in-the-world that promoted hard work and the avoidance of spontaneous pleasure as responses to the uncertainty of predestination.<sup>1</sup> In his classic work, *The Market Revolution*, historian Charles Sellers describes how during the period from 1815-1846, which he deems the Jacksonian Market Revolution, capitalism moved beyond a form of economic exchange and began to restructure social relationships and American ways of being-in-the-world.<sup>2</sup> Nobel Prize-winning economist Edmund Phelps argues that the economic boom in the U.S. economy during the nineteenth century was made possible by the emergence and popularization of modern values, including individualism, vitalism, and self-expression. Phelps argues that these modern values displaced traditional, communitarian values and supported a dynamic economy based on exploration and development.<sup>3</sup> However, Phelps overlooks the degree to which loving and solicitous relationships are necessary for the creative exploration of the self and the development of individual capacities that he associates with a dynamic economy and a fulfilling and flourishing life.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the philosopher of self-reliance, has typically been interpreted as a source of egoistic individualism by readers who conflate self-reliance with

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<sup>1</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Trans. By Gordon C. Wells. (Penguin Classics, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Edmund Phelps, "A Theory of Innovation, Flourishing, and Growth." In *Dynamism*, by Edmund Phelps, Raicho Bojilov, Hian Teck Hoon, and Gylfi Zoega (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 9-17.

self-sufficiency. For example, cultural historian Quentin Anderson finds in Emerson the sources of a narcissistic and imperial subjectivity in American literature and culture,<sup>4</sup> while Christopher Newfield's reading identifies transitions in Emerson's writing on self-reliance between moments of self-sufficiency and submission to the authority of others.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, this study corrects these trends in the literature by examining self-reliance within the context of Emerson's broader religious commitments and metaphysical monism.

As opposed to self-sufficiency, self-reliance is a way of living through thoughtful spontaneity. This research is informed by Stanley Cavell's positioning of Emerson as a source for modern existentialism via his influence on Nietzsche and Heidegger.<sup>6</sup> I approach Emersonian self-reliance through the Heideggerian methodology of uncovering ontology through phenomenology. According to this Heideggerian method, the existential-ontological structure of human existence reveals itself in the phenomena of everyday life.<sup>7</sup> For a reading of Emerson, this means that to fully understand what it means to be self-reliant over the course of a life, we should turn to the phenomenology of self-reliance in everyday experience.

This article's first section explores the religious and existential-ontological significance of self-reliance, while the second section deepens this understanding by exploring the phenomenology of self-reliance in Emerson's writing on the glance of the eyes and conversation. Overall, I argue that Emerson's self-reliance is a response to the narcissism and egoism of nineteenth-century U.S. capitalist culture, showing how self-reliance is a way of overcoming the ego through the manifestation of the spontaneous movements of thought.

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<sup>4</sup> Quentin Anderson, *The Imperial Self: An Essay in American Literary and Cultural History* (New York: Knopf, 1971).

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Newfield, *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York City: Harper Perennial, 2008), 60 (H. 35).

***Capitalism, modern egoism, and self-reliance as reliance on God***

Abraham Lincoln captured the mood of the emerging capitalist culture of the U.S. in his 1858 “Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions,” where he said of Young America,

Thousands of hands are engaged in producing fresh supplies, and other thousands, in bringing them to him. The iron horse is panting, and impatient, to carry him everywhere, in no time; and the lightening [sic.] stands ready harnessed to take and bring his tidings in a trifle less than no time. He owns a large part of the world, by right of possessing it; and all the rest by right of *wanting* it, and *intending* to have it... He has a great passion—a perfect “rage”—for the “*new*.”<sup>8</sup>

Lincoln could already see—without obvious contempt—the networks of unsightly labour that provide for new kinds of insatiable consumption and the manipulations of nature that provide for a petulant expectation of convenience. The emergence of modern U.S. capitalism accompanied the emergence of a modern U.S. egoism that finds support in understandings of freedom and human flourishing rooted in an individual’s capacity for unencumbered choice, consumption, and possession. The expansion of railroads, the invention of the steamboat, and the building of canals and turnpikes through the American Northeast made it possible to ship farm products cheaply from the Midwest, where land was cheap and plentiful. Even from her relatively sedentary perspective, Emily Dickinson notes how new trains could “lap the Miles – / And lick the Valleys up.”<sup>9</sup> The U.S. population began concentrating in densely populated industrialized cities and migrating westward towards new industrial forms of farming. As Emerson observes,

The inventions of the last fifty years counterpoise those of the fifty centuries before them. For the vast production and manifold application of iron is new; and our common and indispensable utensils of house and farm are new; the sewing-machine, the power-loom, the McCormick reaper, the mowing-machines, gas-light, lucifer matches, and the immense productions of the laboratory, are new in this century, and one franc’s worth of coal does the work of a laborer for twenty days.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions,” April 6, 1858, <https://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/discoveries.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Emily Dickinson, “586,” *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Little, Brown and Company, 1960), 286.

<sup>10</sup> Emerson, “Works and Days,” in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Society and Solitude*, vol. 7 (Houghton Mifflin, 1904), 159-160.

Spurred by technological advances that pushed Americans to greater specialization and reliance on the market, American capitalism supported the emergence of new ways of understanding oneself in relation to others and the market.

During the Jacksonian Market Revolution, Emerson witnessed the emergence of a newly distractible, greedy, and egoistic American way of being. In his 1844 essay, “The Young American,” Emerson describes how new railways and roads annihilated the distances between people and places, promising support for a shared “American sentiment.” He writes,

Not only is distance annihilated, but when, as now, the locomotive and the steamboat, like enormous shuttles, shoot every day across the thousand various threads of national descent and employment, and bind them fast in one web, an hourly assimilation goes forward, and there is no danger that local peculiarities and hostilities should be preserved.<sup>11</sup>

The population began to resemble less the self-sufficient life of New England yeoman farmers and came to be organized into networks of economic interdependence typical of advanced capitalism, prompting Emerson to write, “Commerce, is the political fact of most significance to the American at this hour.”<sup>12</sup> Farmers began specializing in the mass production of single crops for the market, while city dwellers became entirely dependent on the market to provide the necessities of life. As Emerson notes, “the farmer who is not wanted by others can yet grow his own bread, whilst the manufacturer or the trader, who is not wanted, cannot.”<sup>13</sup> We can already see in Emerson’s essay the tensions between the ideal of network culture as democratizing and connecting, and its reality as divisive and polarizing. He forecasts that peculiarities will give way to a shared American sentiment but also recognizes that manufacturers, traders, and farmers will have diverging interests.

As Mark C. Taylor discusses in his study of the impacts of nineteenth-century capitalism on modern subjectivity, “Increasing connectivity through high-speed transportation, information, communication, and financial networks not only draws people closer together, but also creates deep social, political, and economic divisions.”<sup>14</sup> More

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<sup>11</sup> Emerson, “The Young American,” in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 2 (Bell & Daldy, 1866), 293.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 296

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 344

<sup>14</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *Speed Limits* (Yale University Press, 2014), 182.

than geographic and economic networks of exchange, the emergence of a culture of capitalism in the U.S. created new concepts of subjectivity and freedom. According to Taylor, the culture of capitalism supports the emergence of a subject that is in possession of itself, seeks the satisfaction of its needs, and understands freedom in terms of choice, consumption, and possession. The modern egoistic subject is skeptical of other people and the obligations and sacrifices that life in community demand. As Taylor argues, this skeptical egoism and unwillingness to trust and live with others support the destruction of our natural environment and, as Hannah Arendt argues, the emergence of anti-democratic and totalitarian politics.<sup>15</sup> Emerson's theory of self-reliance critiques this subject and that critique provides groundwork, by way of Nietzsche, for Taylor's radical a/theological deconstruction of the self and his hope for a subject that delights in generosity.

Without the language, concepts, or temperament to mount a Marxist critique, Emerson describes how he sees economics displacing politics and reducing humans to their market value. He writes,

Trade goes to make the governments insignificant, and to bring every kind of faculty of every individual that can in any manner serve any person, 'on sale.' Instead of a huge Army and Navy, and Executive Departments, it converts Government into an Intelligence-Office, where every man may find what he wishes to buy, and expose what he has to sell, not only produce and manufactures, but art, skill, and intellectual and moral values. This is the good and this the evil of trade, that it would put everything into market, talent, beauty, virtue, and man himself.<sup>16</sup>

The Revolutionary era's ideal of the self-sufficient and moral yeoman farmer, whose family produced what they needed for a modest lifestyle, gave way to the ideal of the self-made man—a term coined by Henry Clay in his February 2, 1832 speech on the Senate floor, "The American System," and later popularized by Frederick Douglass. Douglass articulated the idea of the self-made man in his lecture of that title, where he invokes Emersonian self-reliance as his inspiration.<sup>17</sup> Douglass's formulation of the self-made man is of a man who creates his destiny, often against the best attempts of

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<sup>15</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *Speed Limits*; Hannah Arendt, *Totalitarianism: Part Three of The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Inc., 1994), 172-177; Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: The Viking Press, 1963), 279.

<sup>16</sup> Emerson, "The Young American," 299.

<sup>17</sup> Frederick Douglass, "The Self-Made Man," in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip S. Foner (Lawrence Hill, 1999).

society to keep him down. In the common imagination, this is a person who pulls himself up by his own bootstraps. Self-making came to describe men who grew up poor but achieved economic and political success, as in the common example not only of Douglass himself but also of Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, and Andrew Carnegie. The conflation in American culture of self-reliance with economic self-sufficiency led President Bill Clinton to offer a corrective in his 1996 State of the Union Address, where he said, "The era of big government is over. But we cannot go back to a time when our citizens were left to fend for themselves... Self-reliance and teamwork are not opposing virtues; we must have both."<sup>18</sup> While Emerson has been associated with the ideology of individuality as self-sufficiency, the idea of a self-made man is close to blasphemy for Emerson since, for him, "self-reliance is reliance on God."<sup>19</sup>

Academic commentators widely acknowledge that Emersonian subjectivity includes, at its core, a divine spark. However, this has largely not been taken seriously as a phenomenological description of a psychologically divided subject. That the self has at its core a divine spark is an idea common in Western thought and which Emerson encountered in Plato's daimonion and the Plotinian relationship between souls and the One. He confirmed this divine spark theology as closest to his own religious perspective when he encountered it in Quakerism. Later in life, when he was asked about his religious outlook, Emerson is reported to have said, "I am more of a Quaker than anything else. I believe in the 'still, small voice,' and that voice is Christ within us."<sup>20</sup>

Emersonian subjectivity is divided between a superficial, willing, and desiring ego, which one anxiously maintains and presents to other people, and the inner, impersonal, and generous core of subjectivity, which he sometimes describes as God and sometimes as the intuitive movement of thought. In a journal entry from 1850, Emerson writes,

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<sup>18</sup> William J Clinton, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union." January 23, 1996 (Available at "The American Presidency Project," accessed June 5, 2022, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-the-state-the-union-10>).

<sup>19</sup> Emerson, "Fugitive Slave Law," in *Essential Writings*. Ed. by Books Atkinson. (Modern Library, 2000) 788.

<sup>20</sup> David Greene Haskins, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: His Maternal Ancestors, with some Reminiscences of Him* (Cupples, Upham and Company, 1887) 48.

Culture, the height of Culture, highest behavior consist in the identification of the Ego with the universe, so that when a man says, I think, I hope, I find,—he might properly say, the human race thinks, hopes & finds,—he states a fact which commands the understandings & affections of all the company, and yet, at the same time, he shall be able continually to keep sight of his biographical *ego*,—I had an ague, I had a fortune; my father had black hair; etc. as rhetoric, fun and footman, to his grand & public *ego*, without impertinence or ever confounding them.<sup>21</sup>

In these lines, Emerson contrasts a person's grand and public ego—which in “highest behavior” is identified with the thinking, hoping, and finding of the human race—with their biographical ego. According to Emerson's monism, the grand and public ego is the divine part of oneself that is shared with all other people and the universe. In Emerson's terms, the publicness of the grand ego does not mean that this ego is exposed for all to see but that it is shared in common. As George Kateb interprets Emerson, “To be an individual one must become ‘public’; it means losing ‘personality’ as well as losing the partiality and distinctiveness flowing from one's identification with a group.”<sup>22</sup> In Kateb's account, one's egoistic identification with one's own biography, personality, and group prevents one's public identification with humanity. For Emerson, one's identification with humanity takes place in terms of underlying monism and our shared rootedness in the divine. Contemporary authors that remove reference to the divine are left with the superficial, biographical, and public ego alone. This is the same ego Emerson sought to overcome or conform to the divine in self-reliance. This is the most basic definition of self-reliance: conforming the ego to God. As he writes, “Self-reliance, the height and perfection of man, is reliance on God.”<sup>23</sup>

Herwig Friedl helpfully explains Emersonian subjectivity in terms of what he identifies as Emerson's double consciousness. Friedl writes, “Early on Emerson noted ‘an ambiguity in the term Subjective,’ which serves to designate both the individuality of a person and his ontological participation in or, rather, identity with a totality, that is, both his self and his SELF.”<sup>24</sup> Friedl explains Emersonian subjectivity as a synthesis of social and divine: existing both in the world and in a deeper spiritual ground. Friedl

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<sup>21</sup> Emerson, *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 2. Ed. by A.W. Plumstead and Harrison Hayford (The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1969) 203.

<sup>22</sup> George Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002) 29.

<sup>23</sup> Emerson, “Fugitive Slave Law,” 788.

<sup>24</sup> Herwig Friedl, *Thinking in Search of a Language* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019) 72.



describes “two basic existential moods in Emerson” that call for fusion or reconciliation: “The mythically gained assurance of identity with Being and the seeming aimlessness in a world of shifting values.”<sup>25</sup> Friedl’s suggestion that Emerson seeks a fusion or reconciliation of these two modes of being is a bit misleading. If Emerson seeks a reconciliation between these two ways of being, it is not a reconciliation that would accept a compromise of divine being, nor is it a meeting midway between God and the world. The reconciliation that Emerson calls for conforms one’s ego entirely to the divine and so is just as much an overcoming of the ego. As Emerson writes in his journals, “These hands, this body, this history of Waldo Emerson are profane and wearisome, but I, I descend not to mix myself with that or with any man. Above his life, above all creatures I flow down forever a sea of benefit into races of individuals.”<sup>26</sup> Emerson makes the Hegelian move of replacing his proper name with the first-person pronoun, “I,” which signals absolute individuality as well as impersonality and universality insofar as “I” is a designation available to all people in all times and places. When Emerson here writes “I,” he is invoking the voice of the one divine God who is the ground for all temporal and worldly beings, such as “Waldo Emerson.” For Emerson, the truest or most authentic expression of oneself is motivated by the part of oneself that is universal, divine, and impersonal.

This divided self is the basis for what I refer to as Emerson’s rooted metaphysics. This is the idea—undoubtedly developed in Emerson’s thinking from his readings of Plotinus and German idealism—that all individuals are rooted in a common, divine ground. Thus, on the superficial level of phenomenal experience, each person is an individual, but in a truer way—for which Emerson claimed to find evidence in his (mis)reading of Kant’s theory of the noumenal realm and, later in life, in his reading of Schopenhauer—all people and nature are one. William James notes this intersection of monism and individuality in his description of Emerson’s metaphysical outlook. James writes,

[Emerson’s] metaphysics consisted in the platonic belief that the foundation of all things is an overarching Reason. Sometimes he calls this divine principle the Intellect, sometimes “the Soul,” sometimes the One. Whate’er we call it, we are at one with it so far as our moments of insight of

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<sup>25</sup> Friedl, *Thinking*, 74.

<sup>26</sup> Emerson, *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 7. Edited by William H. Gilman, Alfred R. Ferguson, Harrison Hayford, et. al. (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969) 435.



god. But no moment can go very far, and no one can lay down the law for others, for their angles of vision may be sacred as his own. Hence two tendencies in Emerson, one towards absolute Monism; the other towards radical individualism. They sound contradictory enough; but he held to each of them in its extremist form.<sup>27</sup>

Emersonian subjectivity mirrors the basic structure of Schopenhauer's metaphysics—a similarity Emerson notes later in life when he reads selections from Schopenhauer's work. In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer pushes Kant's understanding of the non-temporality and non-spatiality of the noumenal realm to its logical conclusion. If time and space are mental intuitions that structure the phenomenal realm, then the noumenal realm, without the intuitions of time or space, can be deduced as a single thing-in-itself. Without time or space, there can be no sense of individuality, separation, or change, and thus only one thing. Separation and individuality are part of the way the mind organizes phenomenal reality. Thus, the things in our world appear to be separate objects though they are ultimately unified.

While Schopenhauer's monism applies to all phenomena, Emerson usually describes a monism of living things—humans and nature. Emerson's monism is supported by the idea of noumenal reality, but Emerson's monism is based on an intuition of spiritual unity more than physical unity, and for this reason, it is grounded more essentially in his Neoplatonism. Though Emerson would eventually agree with Schopenhauer's view, Emerson's early monism is not based on the non-temporality and non-spatiality of the Kantian thing-in-itself, but rather on the abiding spiritual participation of all creatures in a divine ground. As he writes in "Sermon CXLII," "The moral universe is one great family, included in God as the waves are contained in the ocean."<sup>28</sup> Similarly, he writes in "Over-soul," "As there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so there is no bar or wall in the soul, where man, the effect, ceases, and God, the cause, begins... We live open on one side to the deeps of spiritual nature, to the attributes of God."<sup>29</sup> The impact of his early engagement with Neoplatonism, largely in Thomas Taylor's translations of Plotinus,

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<sup>27</sup> William James, "Emerson," in *The Works of William James: Manuscripts, Essays and Notes*, Ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988) 318.

<sup>28</sup> Emerson, *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson, vol. 4*. Ed. by Wesley T. Mott and Albert J. von Frank. (University of Missouri Press, 1992) 64.

<sup>29</sup> Emerson, "Over-soul," in *Essential Writings*, 238.

is evident in Emerson's thinking about the way humans abide in divinity as well as in the way he describes thinking as a receptive capacity. Though less systematic than Plotinus, Emerson draws on several concepts evocative of Plotinus in his metaphysical essays and descriptions of the relationship between God and humanity. Following Plotinus, Emerson describes the human as a receiver of thought, spirit, life, and strength: a benefactor of a spiritual reality, at once higher than oneself and internal to oneself, and in which each person is ultimately grounded.<sup>30</sup>

One's thoughts could seem to be the most authentic contribution one could make from the depths of one's freedom and will, and yet Emerson is emphatic that one is the receiver or the observer of one's thoughts. In "Over-soul," he writes,

Man is a stream whose source is hidden. Our being is descending into us from we know not whence... I am constrained every moment to acknowledge a higher origin for events than the will I call mine. As it is with events, so it is with thoughts. When I watch that flowing river, which, out of regions I see not, pours for a season its streams into me, I see that I am a pensioner; not a cause but a surprised spectator of this ethereal water; that I desire and look up and put myself in the attitude of reception, but from some alien energy the visions come.<sup>31</sup>

For Emerson, thought is the influx of the divine Over-soul into the human mind. Thus, one's thoughts become one's own, not in the thinking, but in their manifestation in the world. It is in the self-reliant expression and carrying through of thought that one lays claim to thought. Far from a willful expression of self—more appropriate to the striving of the ego—thought is placing oneself in the position of receptivity for inspiration.

Though Emerson's religious language makes some contemporary readers uneasy, Emerson cannot be read without God if we want to understand the full complexity of the Emersonian subject. However, Emerson leaves room for a non-religious understanding of the phenomenology of thinking when he discusses the voice of God as intuition. It is not only thought but ultimately self-reliance, which he describes as a reception of divinity. As I show below, self-reliance is not the autarchic and willful

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<sup>30</sup> The idea of God as above and inner to the self is a Neoplatonic theme that pervades early and medieval Christian thought. For example, in Augustine's characterization in *Confessions* of God as "*interior intimo meo*" (higher than my highest and more inner than my innermost).

<sup>31</sup> Emerson, "Over-soul," 237.

production of the ego; it is rather the overcoming or forgetting of this ego in such a way that one manifests the intuitive movement of thought.

Building upon the relationship between individuality and monism, Emerson distinguishes two modes of thought—Understanding and Reason—a division he picks up from Kant and romanticists such as Carlyle, although Emerson construes these terms differently. For Kant, understanding is the faculty of the mind that deals with causality and phenomena; it is piecemeal, temporal, and reliant on the sensory intuitions of the world. Reason, the synthetic faculty of the mind, is used to draw inferential conclusions beyond what is empirically given. Such inferential knowledge is essentially foreclosed in Kantian epistemology: Reason seeks to know the thing-in-itself but only produces non-empirically based illusions. In a decidedly religious mood, Emerson grants Reason access to the noumenal and spiritual realm. As Buell astutely observes, “That Kant denies Reason can know the thing in itself, whereas Emerson granted Reason that knowledge invoking Kantian authority, is one of the ironies of intellectual history. The key point is that Emerson believed that inner-lightism had good modern epistemological warrant.”<sup>32</sup> Emerson’s Reason is the capacity to receive thought and ethical motivation from the Over-soul, and thus an indispensable component of self-reliance.

One of the most striking features of Emersonian subjectivity is the degree to which one’s everyday identity, the person one usually takes oneself to be, is a false image of oneself. This exterior ego is the locus of personality, will, and choice. It is who one takes oneself to be in one’s everyday inauthenticity and the part of one’s being that stands apart from the divine unity and becomes an individual and a skeptic. He writes in “Over-soul,”

What we commonly call man is the facade of a temple wherein all wisdom and all good abide.

What we commonly call man, the eating, drinking, planting, counting man, does not, as we know him, represent himself, but misrepresents himself. Him we do not respect, but the soul, whose organ he is, would he let it appear through his action, would make our knees bend.<sup>33</sup>

This superficial ego is an inauthentic expression of oneself insofar as it is a symptom of one’s lacking the courage to manifest divine intuition self-reliantly. The ego is that

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<sup>32</sup> Lawrence Buell, *Emerson* (Harvard Belknap Press, 2003) 61.

<sup>33</sup> Emerson, “Over-soul,” 238.

part of oneself that refuses to follow a vocation because it is turned towards worldly commitments, especially the commitment to social norms and the ego's autobiographical continuity.

The ego is not merely an inauthentic expression of oneself; it is most essentially the wall one throws up and maintains in the face of the other when people self-unreliantly “descend to meet.”<sup>34</sup> The ego is the anxious reaction to “the hobgoblins of small minds”—others' expectations (i.e., my fear of showing myself to be different than they expect me to be) and one's own anxiety about autobiographical continuity (i.e., my concern that my present and future should conform with my past: that I should become who I have been; that I should be systematic; that I should keep my word; that I should finish what I've started). Thus, both social and intrapsychic anxieties support the ego. This ego is a bad faith commitment to one's past, an inertia that prevents one from having an authentic present or future. In its commitment to the past, the ego is one's descent in the presence of others and the loss of a future.

More essential to one's being than the superficial ego is the divine spark at the heart of subjectivity. The divine spark is the origin of thought and intuition; it reveals one's vocation, calling one to become who one is. In everyday life, one tends to turn from the divine spark to ignore its call and anxiously flee toward the ego. It calls one in unrestrained and novel ways towards oneself and out of bad faith and self-unreliant commitment to what one has been. Interestingly, Emerson describes this part of the self not only as universal and public but also as impersonal. Publicness is just another way Emerson speaks about the universality of the divine spark. It is public because it is what one shares with all others. As Kateb puts it,

To be an individual one must become “public”; it means losing “personality” as well as losing the partiality of distinctiveness flowing from one's identification with a group... We ascend by abandonment—that is, by the deliberate struggle against being calculating, against becoming obsessively self-absorbed, self-furthering, even self-realizing.... We abandon pride of personality. We mitigate what I have called ‘positive personality’ because it distorts self-reliant receptivity.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Emerson, “Friendship,” in *Essential Writings*, 205.

<sup>35</sup> Kateb, 29.

The divine spark is metaphysically universal because it is the same monistic, divine ground in which all people are all rooted. It is morally universal because it speaks the same truth to all people. The common moral vocation is what Emerson has in mind when he writes of publicness. Publicness is the idea that if one speaks from intuition, one's words will take on broad public significance since, in such words, other people will recognize their own latent thoughts and familiar vocation.

Emerson's next move has confounded many readers since he claims that what is most suited to one's self-reliance is not the particularity of one's experience but that which is impersonal and universal. He writes, "That which is individual and remains individual in my experience is of no value. What is fit to engage me and so engage others permanently, is what has put off its weeds of time & place & personal relation."<sup>36</sup> He pushes the logic further to argue that the divine spark, in its universality, is entirely impersonal. The ego is the center of one's personality, while divine intuition is the universal, public, and impersonal movement of all life. Thus, though academic and casual readers regularly portray Emerson as egoistic and individualistic, he is actually highly suspicious of the ideology of individualism.

In self-reliance, it is this divine spark, the innermost and most universal part of oneself, on which one relies. As Emerson writes in "The Fugitive Slave Act," "Self-reliance, the height of human culture, is reliance on God."<sup>37</sup> Thus, perhaps counterintuitively, self-reliance is a manifestation not of the willful, choosing ego-self but of the universal, impersonal, and generous aspect of one's being. As Buell puts it, "We are entitled to trust our deepest convictions of what is true and right insofar as every person's innermost identity is a transpersonal universal."<sup>38</sup>

Emerson describes children and students as examples of people naturally in the position of self-reliant impersonality. Children and students are neutral, accepting of novelty and without commitment to parties or systems of thought. He extolls the virtues of youthful neutrality over several paragraphs in "Self-Reliance," where he writes,

What pretty oracles nature yields us on this text in the face and behavior of children, babes, and even brutes. That divided and rebel mind, that distrust of a sentiment because our arithmetic has

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<sup>36</sup> Emerson, *Journals*, vol. 7, 65.

<sup>37</sup> Emerson, "The Fugitive Slave Act," 788.

<sup>38</sup> Buell, 59.

computed the strength and the means opposed to our purpose, these have not. Their mind being whole, their eye is as yet unconquered.

The nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say ought to conciliate one, is the healthy attitude of human nature... He cumbers himself never about consequences, about interests; he gives an independent, genuine verdict... But the man is as it were clapped into jail by his consciousness. As soon as he has acted or spoken with *éclat* he is a committed person, watched by the sympathy or the hatred of hundreds, whose affections must now enter into his account. There is no Lethe for this. Ah, that he could pass again into his neutrality! Who can thus avoid all pledges and, having observed, observe again from the same unaffected, unbiased, unbribable, unaffrighted innocence—must always be formidable.<sup>39</sup>

The infant is blissfully unaware of social expectations and unconcerned with autobiographical continuity. The same goes for nonchalant boys, free of anxiety about the future and committed to nothing other than the enjoyment of the present. Adults are committed to others' expectations and their own and so are unable to be who they are in the present. Analogously, Emerson describes philosophers and theologians to be committed to the spreading of systems rather than the discovery of novelty: "Leave your theory, as Joseph his coat in the hands of the harlot, and flee. A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines."<sup>40</sup> Emerson's point is not that the naive neutrality of children is the highest perspective. The infant's neutrality is a neutrality that has not observed the world and so lacks the knowledge and experience that would make the neutral, childlike adult the fullest manifestation of self-reliance. He provides a list of such people, "Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo," not systematizers but also not mystics; these men, according to Emerson, lived in the world with thoughtful spontaneity and without becoming committed to the world's ways.

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<sup>39</sup> Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Essential Writings*, 134.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

*The phenomenology of self-reliance: the glance and conversation*

Emerson discusses self-reliance in both existential and phenomenological terms. The impersonality and spontaneity of phenomenological self-reliance open a way to understand and manifest the existential self-reliance discussed in the first section of this paper. Emerson discusses phenomenological self-reliance in the glance of the eyes and conversation. In these experiences, one acts and encounters the other without regard for the anxious maintenance of the ego-self. The glance and conversation are moments when one is given over to the divine self and the intuitive movement of thought. But self-reliance is not just about these passing experiences of ego transcendence. Self-reliance is more appropriately about expressing the divine self over the course of one's life, which involves a more perduring overcoming of the ego. Self-reliance is not merely the ego loss that allows one to flow in friendly conversations, but the transcendence that allows one to be in one's life today and everyday who one is in the present, without being determined by who one takes oneself to be or who one presents oneself as in society. Existential self-reliance is the ego transcendence that allows one to live their vocation as called in the present without regard to one's bad-faith commitments or others' expectations.

The glance shows up repeatedly in Emerson's writings, both as a form of communication among friends and as a moment of self-reliant action. True friendship and moments of self-reliance go together since true friendship is an affinity between people's inner divinities, and self-reliance is the exposure of one's inner divinity to the world and the other. Glances appear in two important ways in Emerson's work: glances between people, and glances at the world. Both examples describe people who are lost in thought, looking without aim and egoistic concern. One glances at the world in the mode of thoughtful receptivity. Similarly, lost in thought and without concern for the ego, one's eyes sometimes meet another's in the intersubjective glance. Here, one is not only given over to thought, but one sees another person egolessly actualizing the intuitive movements of their thoughts. Such moments can be startling and intrusive precisely because we see the other with her guard down and her thinking exposed.

Glancing at the world in the mode of receptive thought is an experience familiar to anyone who practices philosophy, writing, or any form of deep and sustained



thought. One glances at the world contemplatively, awaiting the advent of ideas or the proper words. For Emerson, glancing at the world is a practice of active thinking. He writes in "Intellect," "Our spontaneous action is always best. You cannot with your best deliberation and heed come so close to any question as your spontaneous glance shall bring you, whilst you rise from your bed, or walk abroad in the morning after meditating the matter before sleep on the previous night. Our thinking is a pious reception."<sup>41</sup> Glancing is an anticipatory looking at the world that sees nothing in particular since it is a manifestation of the mind's general openness. In "Behavior," Emerson writes, "The eye obeys exactly the action of the mind. When a thought strikes us, the eyes fix and remain gazing at a distance."<sup>42</sup> The glance looks beyond the particularity of objects in order to see the world, generalizing not only one's visual perspective but also one's mode of thought. In the mode of deep, thoughtful receptivity expressed by the glance at the world, one momentarily leaves behind concern for one's partial ego-self, forgetting one's outward presentation of self and allowing the intuitive movement of thought to rise to the surface. In this way, the contemplative glance at the world is an experience that points towards self-reliance.

Emerson often likens the intersubjective glance to friendly conversation, which is his other major example of phenomenological self-reliance. In *Conduct of Life*, he even claims that the glance is a more effective means of communication than conversation, being more general and universal than language expressed through particular words and linguistic conventions: "The eyes of men converse as much as their tongues, with the advantage that the ocular dialect needs no dictionary, but is understood all the world over."<sup>43</sup> Though I may not understand the other's lament, I see the pain and sorrow in her face, and I recognize it as an eruption of the same emotions and sensations that move me in my own sorrow. Whereas the conventions of a language particularize thought, the glance brings us back to our essential universality and monism. In his early essay on friendship, "The Heart," Emerson writes, "The Heart is as I have said a community of nature which really does bind all men into a consciousness of one brotherhood. Of this the look between man and man is the

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<sup>41</sup> Emerson, "Intellect," in *Essential Writings*, 264.

<sup>42</sup> Emerson, "Behavior," in *Conduct of Life* (The Riverside Press, 1883) 178.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 180.

expression.”<sup>44</sup> When in the course of my day, I catch the eye of another, and we glance at each other; we see each other as we are given over to the intuitive movement of our thoughts. In the glance, I am seen thinking, while simultaneously, I see the one who sees me in her act of thinking. Glancing, we see each other with our guards down; we see each other given over to thought and, in a moment, without concern for the maintenance and presentation of the ego.

The young Emerson, in “The Heart,” writes that the glance is superior to conversation not only because words as such concretize and particularize the thoughts they speak but also because language is willful and thus associated with the ego, whereas the glance is unwilled and spontaneous. The somewhat later Emerson of *Essays*, and the much later Emerson of *Conduct of Life*, identify a form of egoless and flowing conversation which speaks self-reliantly, from beyond the will, much as the glance sees. That the glance is not an expression of will or ego means that it is an expression of the intuitive movement of one’s thought and thus an experience of self-reliance in the present:

One of the most wonderful things in nature, where all is wonderful, is, the glance, or meeting of the eyes; this speedy and perfect communication which transcends speech and action also and is in the greatest part not subject to the control of the will. It is the bodily symbol of identity in nature. Here is the whole miracle of our being, made sensible,—the radical unity, the superficial diversity. Strange that any body who ever met another person’s eyes, should doubt that all men have one soul.<sup>45</sup>

The glance overcomes the stingy and egoistic skepticism about our underlying monism—a skepticism manifest in the ideal of egoistic individualism—and reveals the Emersonian subject’s rootedness in an impersonal, divine unity. When two people encounter each other, egoless and self-reliantly expressing the intuitive movement of their thought, as they do momentarily in the intersubjective glance, each sees the other as an incarnation of the impersonal and general divinity that permeates all nature. The phenomenology of being seen in one’s self-reliant spontaneity—being caught off guard being one’s thoughts in the world when one has forgotten one’s concern for the hobgoblins of little minds—is an experience in the present of a self-reliant life.

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<sup>44</sup> Emerson, “The Heart,” in *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson, vol. 2*. Ed. By Stephen Whicher, Robert Spiller, and Wallace Williams (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964) 283.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

In *Essays: Series One* and *Conduct of Life*, Emerson develops the experience of conversation as an example of phenomenological self-reliance. “Conversation,” he writes, “is the vent of character as well as of thought.”<sup>46</sup> Whereas the glance is momentary and essentially gone as soon as one recognizes it, the loss of oneself in conversation is a more perduring experience of self-reliance. He writes in “Experience,” “All good conversation, manners, and action, come from a spontaneity which forgets usages, and makes the moment great. Nature hates calculators; her methods are saltatory and impulsive. Man lives by pulses; our organic movements are such.”<sup>47</sup> In the kind of good conversations Emerson has in mind, the participants focus on the ideas of the conversation, forgetting about their anxious conformity to social expectations and commitments in their presentation of themselves. In such conversations, ideas flow through each speaker so that each exposes the spontaneous movements of thought to the other. Because in conversation, we see and hear the other as another person thinking—which is to say, in self-reliant and egoless spontaneity—we get a glimpse again of our underlying monism.

Conversations that are examples of self-reliance are rare, and our speaking to one another more often consists of thoughtless gossip and evasive politeness. The common mode of conversation in society is the confrontation of two egos, anxiously and politely maintaining their identities and never exposing the spontaneity of thought. In “Friendship,” Emerson writes, “Every man alone is sincere. At the entrance of a second person, hypocrisy begins. We parry and fend the approach of our fellow-man by compliments, by gossip, by amusements, by affairs. We cover up our thought from him under a hundred folds.”<sup>48</sup> We fend off the other’s approach in conversation through the thoughtless and formulaic performance of manners and social conventions. Rather than self-reliantly revealing our thoughts and selves, we discuss the events of our day, the news, and small talk. We politely censor our thoughts not to offend the other’s partialities, only saying what is pleasing and acceptable in the other’s company.

Polite consideration for the other’s partialities can be such a hindrance to authentic conversation that Emerson even considers whether conversation might be

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<sup>46</sup> Emerson, “Clubs,” in *Society and Solitude*, 237.

<sup>47</sup> Emerson, “Experience,” in *Essential Writings*, 318.

<sup>48</sup> Emerson, “Friendship,” in *Essential Writings*, 207.

best among strangers. Unknown and unrevealed, the stranger is, for Emerson, an example of universality incarnate. In "Friendship," he writes of the stranger, "He stands to us for humanity. He is what we wish."<sup>49</sup> A stranger is someone I know nothing about, and so is, for me, an infinite potential. One can speak more freely with the stranger since one is unaware of the stranger's sensibilities. I know my acquaintance prefers to avoid and is offended by certain topics, so our discussions remain within polite limits. Emerson goes on to describe conversation with a commended stranger:

The same idea exalts conversation with him. We talk better than we are wont. We have the nimblest fancy, a richer memory, and our dumb devil has taken leave for the time... But as soon as the stranger begins to intrude his partialities, his definitions, his defects, into the conversation, it is all over. He has heard the first, the last and best he will ever hear from us. He is no stranger now... Now, when he comes, he may get the order, the dress, and the dinner,—but the throbbing of the heart, and the communications of the soul, no more.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, the stranger provides another fleeting experience of self-reliance in the world. The stranger whose ego has yet to be revealed is to me an image of the impersonal and universally human. Every stranger is potentially the friend and conversation partner for whom Emerson searches. The strange image of universality is spoiled when the stranger descends to become an individual ego through the introduction of her partialities.

Emerson writes that we often slip into deficient modes of polite and mannered speaking not only when we are trying not to offend our partner but also when the topic of conversation does not interest us. A conversation which would be of no interest fails to consider topics of universal concern and instead dwells on what is of egotistical interest to the one who speaks. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson describes the "mortifying experience" of being trapped in an uninteresting conversation. He writes that one slips into the mode of mechanical politeness, playing the role of audience: "The forced smile which we put on in company where we do not feel at ease, in answer to conversation which does not interest us. The muscles, not spontaneously moved but moved by a low usurping willfulness, grow tight around the outline of the face, with the most disagreeable sensation."<sup>51</sup> Uninteresting conversation closes off the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Emerson, "Self-Reliance," 137.

possibility of self-reliance since it demands the non-spontaneous performance of politeness precisely to cover up one's thoughts and boredom. Such a performance, which blocks one's spontaneous thought to please the other while maintaining a certain socially acceptable and expected image of oneself, is the antithesis of self-reliance.

It is not only one-sided and uninteresting conversations that keep people from self-reliantly revealing themselves, but also gossip. Emerson writes of gossip as a mode of self-unreliant talking commonly employed to parry the other's approach. In his 1832 "Sermon CLV," Emerson describes gossip as a form of talking that is narrowly specific to a particular time, place, and ego. In contrast, true conversation reveals the inmost universality of the egoless movement of spontaneous thought:

Thoughts which are superficial are local and personal; would be unsuitable to any other time or place. Those which move the man from the bottom of his soul are equally interesting to all men. Carry the gossip of your street to Rome or Japan and it would be unintelligible. But your conclusions respecting right and wrong, the laws of the mind, the end of man, which command your own interests at all times have an equal interest for all men that ever were on earth.... Thus is the inmost self the universal nature of man.<sup>52</sup>

Gossip is talking about ego identities and the particularities of a person's life, and thus not conversation on any perduring or universal truth. One gossips about what was done or said by a particular person, about the events and exchanges pertaining to individual people in the world. One does not gossip about eternal truth or topics of universal concern. Unlike the conversational intimacy wherein people share in a mood based on the mutual exposure of their spontaneous thinking, the gossipy concern with mundane events and encounters can only acquaint one ego with another. When an encounter between people takes place in terms of the formulaic performance of manners or the thoughtless and egoistic sharing of gossip, "all is yet unsaid, from the incapacities of the parties to know each other, although they use the same words."<sup>53</sup>

Good conversation considers topics of shared interest, and in their focus on the topic of conversation, each partner forgets their self-unreliant concern for social conventions and others' expectations, revealing the spontaneous movements of

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<sup>52</sup> Emerson, "Sermon CLV," in *Sermons*, 146.

<sup>53</sup> Emerson, "Nominalist and Realist," in *Collected Works*, vol. 3, ed. By Joseph Slater, Alfred R. Ferguson, and Jean Carr (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1984) 145.

thought. As discussed above, Emerson understands this spontaneous movement as revelatory of a monistic, divine, and pre-egoistic ground of subjectivity. Thus, two people conversing are not only examples of self-reliance but also an experience of the underlying unity of the world. In "Over-Soul," he writes,

Persons are supplementary to the primary teaching of the soul. ...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.<sup>54</sup>

When one is caught up in good conversation, speaking and moving self-reliantly and without thought for others' judgements, one speaks with the universal voice of God. Further on, he writes, "We know better than we do. We do not yet possess ourselves, and we know at the same time that we are much more. I feel the same truth how often in my trivial conversation with my neighbours, that somewhat higher in each of us overlooks this by-play, and Jove nods to Jove behind each of us."<sup>55</sup> These lived experiences of self-reliance, in the glance and in conversation, are indications of the existential self-reliance by which one becomes who one is over the course of a life. In the glance, one is caught in a moment of thought. In conversation, one gives oneself over to the topic of discussion and reveals one's unmannered speech and spontaneous thoughts. Because Emerson understands these spontaneous thoughts to be the voice of God, glances and conversations are moments of revelation and incarnation.

Irena Makarushka looks to Emerson's sermons as examples of revelatory conversations between the preacher and his congregation. She writes that preaching "unites the seer with the sayer. It is an expression of the soul's insight, and as such, it is the soul conversing with other souls. For Emerson, this conversation constituted the ongoing process of revelation."<sup>56</sup> Makarushka shows us how Emerson's sermons are revelatory conversations. However, we can take this further since not only sermons but all good conversations are moments of religious ecstasy, revelation, and self-reliance. She takes Emerson's advice to preachers—to speak with the force of their inner divinity, as did Jesus—to be narrowly applicable to preachers. Whereas for

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<sup>54</sup> Emerson, "Over-Soul," 241.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>56</sup> Irena Makarushka, *Religious Imagination and Language in Emerson and Nietzsche*. (St. Martin's Press, 1994) 18.

Emerson, speaking with divinity is possible in all good conversations, providing a phenomenological example of self-reliance.

While conversation reveals metaphysical and existential truths about who one is and how one is related to others, it also does the more epistemological work of developing one's thoughts and expression. Articulating one's ideas in conversation is already by itself an effective way to begin developing these ideas by concretizing and defining them in language. Emerson refers to this as "the mechanics of conversation" when he writes, "Conversation is the laboratory and workshop of the student... Every time we say a thing in conversation, we get a mechanical advantage in detaching it well and deliverly. I prize the mechanics of conversation. 'T is pulley and lever and screw."<sup>57</sup> Much as a mathematician scrawls numbers on a pad to more easily manipulate them, the expression of ideas into words allows conversation partners to go to work on the ideas.

But even before going to work on ideas, we get an advantage from the speaking of ideas, settling them and concretizing them in words. Expressing an idea through words allows that idea to circulate in the world, to be taken up and worked upon by others. The benefit for one's thought of concretizing ideas in words and facing the challenge of actually communicating and being understood will be familiar to anyone who has had to teach a class or prepare a formal explanation. In "Social Aims," Emerson writes, "It is very certain that sincere and happy conversation doubles our powers; that in the effort to unfold our thought to a friend, we make it clearer to ourselves, and surround it with illustrations that help and delight us. It may happen that each hears from the other a better wisdom than any one else will ever hear from either.... for in good conversation parties don't speak to the words, but to the meanings of each other."<sup>58</sup> In communicating one's ideas to another, one becomes more familiar with those ideas oneself. Emerson writes,

Conversation, which, when it is best, is a series of intoxications. Not Aristotle, not Kant or Hegel, but conversation, is the right metaphysical professor. This is the true school of philosophy,—this the college where you learn what thoughts are, what powers lurk in those fugitive gleams, and what becomes of them; how they make history. A wise man goes to this game to play upon others

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<sup>57</sup> Emerson, "Clubs," 228-229.

<sup>58</sup> Emerson, "Social Aims," in *Society and Solitude*, 92-93; 100.



and to be played upon, and at least as curious to know what can be drawn from himself as what can be drawn from them. For, in discourse with a friend, our thought, hitherto wrapped in our consciousness, detaches itself, and allows itself to be seen as a thought, in a manner as new and entertaining to us as to our companions. For provocation of thought, we use ourselves and use each other... We must be warmed by the fire of sympathy, to be brought into the right conditions and angles of vision.<sup>59</sup>

Here, Emerson moves from the mechanical and workshop concept of conversation, pointing out the role of sympathy in conversation. Conversation is not only thinking-with but also feeling-with (sympathy), a sharing of mood.

Conversation takes one beyond oneself and one's own abilities because it is the intercourse of minds thinking. Like partners in a relay race, conversation partners move the topic in new directions before it is taken up and moved further. Emerson writes, "Conversation is a game of circles. In conversation, we pluck up the *termini* which bound the common silence on every side."<sup>60</sup> The common silence is not merely that which has yet to be said, but that which neither of us can say without the other, and thus that which can only be brought out of silence through our common action. Good conversation synergistically moves the conversation partners beyond that which either is capable of on her own. A good conversation partner is someone who agonistically challenges me and draws out my thinking beyond itself. In "Inspiration," Emerson writes,

Homer said, "When two come together, one apprehends before the other;" but it is because one thought well that the other thinks better: and two men of good mind will excite each other's activity, each attempting still to cap the other's thought. In enlarged conversation we have suggestions that require new ways of living, new books, new men, new arts and sciences. By sympathy, each opens to the eloquence, and begins to see with the eyes of his mind. We were all lonely, thoughtless; and now a principle appears to all; we see new relations, many truths; every mind seizes them as they pass; each catches by the mane one of these strong coursers like horses of the prairie, and rides up and down in the world of the intellect.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Emerson, "Inspiration," in *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Letters and Social Aims* (Fireside Edition, 1903) 293-94.

<sup>60</sup> Emerson, "Circles," in *Essential Writings*, 256.

<sup>61</sup> Emerson, "Inspiration," 294.

Conversation, like friendship, can be interpreted in terms of the Greek agon (ἀγών), a friendly competition or sparring between warriors that serve to exercise and develop their skills. Agonistic competitors become strong through each other. When one exceeds or betters one's competition, one does not dominate the other; rather, one liberates the other to development.<sup>62</sup>

More than helping one to exercise and develop one's ideas, a good conversation partner allows one to say what one cannot say to oneself. In "Considerations by the way," he writes, "Conversation... is a main function of life. What a difference in the hospitality of minds! Inestimable is he to whom we can say what we cannot say to ourselves."<sup>63</sup> Such a hospitable mind goes beyond simply providing an occasion to express oneself or even agonistically develop one's ideas. The conversation partner who allows me to say what I cannot say to myself is the occasion of a new thought, not simply the development of an old idea. This partner allows me to express a truth about myself that I have avoided or cannot see because it is what structures my ability to see. Conversation decenters the speaker and allows her to get beyond her own intellectual frameworks. In his manuscript on friendship, Emerson writes of the educative function of conversation,

But there is a use which is rendered to us by our friends which is not mercenary nor finite, but is absolute <productive of an eternal benefit,> & everlasting & is the very highest office which one being can render to another. It is, that, we educate each other. It is, that, one man is trained up to the knowledge of what he is & what he can do, by the instrumentality of other men; that by our mutual action, conversation, and observation, our powers are exercised & disclosed to us.<sup>64</sup>

More than being disclosed to the conversation partner, one is disclosed to oneself in conversation.

In this article, I have developed a reading of Emersonian self-reliance and subjectivity grounded in Emerson's religiosity. I have shown how self-reliance functions as a psychological, phenomenological, and existential concept that Emerson

<sup>62</sup> Yunus Tuncel, *Agon in Nietzsche* (Marquette University Press, 2013).

<sup>63</sup> Emerson, "Considerations by the Way," in *The Conduct of Life*, 270.

<sup>64</sup> Emerson, in Kalinevitch, "Emerson on Friendship," 54. NB: The symbols included in these lines are the standard notations used by the editors of *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson* to indicate Emerson's later revisions of his journal entries. <...> indicates a deletion from the original text, and

↑ ... ↓ indicates an addition.

develops in response to the emergence of capitalist culture and a subjectivity defined by skeptical egoism and an understanding of freedom as choice and consumption. The self-reliant person is one who overcomes the anxious maintenance of an ego identity in the face of others' expectations and one's own desire for autobiographical continuity. Overcoming the ego, the self-reliant person actualizes the spontaneous movements of thought, which Emerson understands as intuition and the voice of God. Emerson prizes moments in daily life when a person forgets the maintenance of the ego and is moved by spontaneity: the glance and good conversations. These moments of phenomenological self-reliance help us to understand the existential structure of a self-reliant life. Self-reliance becomes an existential concept when understood on the level of a life, where one gives up anxious attachment to the ego not just in the momentary ecstasy of conversation but in a more perduring way in everyday life and the relationships one develops.

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