Mauricio Resendez

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Professor Gutierrez

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Emerson’s Influence on the American Society

Ralph Waldo Emerson is an eminent name in the world of American prose, poetry and philosophy. His writings are reflective of his strong beliefs, which had a significant impact on American society. For instance, in his book *Self Reliance,* Emerson explores the meaning of individualism and the importance of an undisputed trust of a person's instinct. The author posits that accepting the need for individuality can transform a society. In this regard, it is also essential to note that his teachings are primarily based upon *Transcendentalism* and *Individualism*. Therefore, he believed that the revolution could only be attained through the revolution of one person at a time and through the development of leaders who can lead a society to greatness instead of the general belief about a collective mass movement. Thus, in the light of Emerson's philosophy, the present essay will explore the effects that the teachings of Emerson will have on society and how it can bring change in it, especially in American society.

American society has embraced markedly the school of thought introduced by Emerson. His philosophies have been one of the driving forces of American society as more and more people accept the need for *mind over matter* (Emerson 12). Emerson later influenced a movement known as transcendentalism, positing that the truth is founded on the impulsive, subconscious instincts. Furthermore, this philosophical movement of transcendentalism, which began during the 1820s, eventually led to an intellectual uprising that emphasized that the corrupt society and institutions spoil the individual's goodness. Thus, if the American society were to follow the principles advocated by Emerson, they need to transgress from collectivism. In response to Emerson's beliefs, many critics opposed his philosophy and teachings by arguing that his rationalism is against the practical reforms. One of Emerson's critics states that "Emerson is not a true Transcendentalist, had no system and was more a poet than a philosopher; cause his rationalism did not allow reason to take part in matters pertaining to the heart, nor conscience concerned society" (Michaud 73).

Furthermore, Emerson's transcendentalism also targets religion and religious beliefs contrary to the sacred beliefs of the Church. Emerson felt that contemporary religion was detached and cold. Hence, the movement believes that the present-day religion is impersonal and does not cultivate a sense of relationship with the divine that should be sought in religion (Emerson). In this connection, he argues that people do not need churches to foster a connection with nature and divinity. Hence, Emerson being a transcendentalist, emphasized on the argument that a society that follows the principles articulated in the text would have to accept their intuitions about supreme beings, experience, and nature. In this context, many critics have come forward and supported Emerson's stance stating that the foundation of religion in Emerson's perspective is based upon the moral consciousness of an individual. According to Michaud, "Emerson refers all religion to the test of individual experience. The foundations of religious belief are in the inner sense which no criticism historical nor critical, can affect" (75). Therefore, Emerson's concept of transcendentalism is based upon the "declaration of spiritual independence, a plea for religious autonomy," which means that Emerson propagates worshipping and submitting oneself to the provided laws at the measure of the inner soul (Michaud 76). Therefore, Michaud declares him as too much of a transcendentalist (ibid).

Similarly, Emerson's views about the society would also encourage individualism in American society. His principles, also known as the *Ethics of Authenticity,* advise people in any society to follow their path and deduce their ethical and intellectual virtues on their own terms. It is illustrated as:

"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. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought because it is his. In every work of genius, we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty." (Emerson 21)

In this respect, Emerson also attributes the rationale of human existence to individualism and selfhood. His idea of prioritizing individualism over society is also based on the fact that individualism is a state of becoming transient, which drives the moral rationale and skepticism in an individual. Wolfe further presents his stance by stating that "the very transience of the self, the provisionality of any proof of selfhood, is the rationale for its "onwardness," its continued "enacting" of its existence" (141).

It is evident that Emerson is averse to the notion of society when compared to his deep belief about the potential of an individual. He argues that society is a hindrance to the concept of self-reliance that suggests that trusting and depending on oneself will result in one living the life that they want. It has been stated that:

Society everywhere is in a conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater." (Emerson 27)

Accordingly, should the American society adopt the teachings of Emerson, people would not have to conform to the social expectations but would only celebrate a person solely dependent on their excellence. There would be the possibility of living a ‘good life' on one's terms without any interference from others. People would not be coerced to attain any other person's notion about success.

On the other hand, following the teachings of Emerson, superficially would lead to chaos in the society since the norms and traditions that keep the American society together would be destroyed. Negative consequences, such as allowing criminals and sociopaths to live as they want, would create unnecessary chaos in our world. It is asserted that:

"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; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it." (Emerson 32)

The teachings of Emerson have both positive and negative effects on society. A society that would adapt the teachings would be more inclined toward individualism such that anyone would have a chance to define the meaning of success. People would live on their own terms without being influenced by the present social norms that discourage people from various actions that would lead to unpleasant consequences. Such a society would result in an influx of social ills since criminals and sociopaths would be allowed to define their success notion.

Likewise, many critics have presented their arguments targeting Emerson's concept of liberal individualism that he claimed in contrast to society. A critic demonstrates his stance explaining the consequences of individualism in American society by stating that individualism or self-reliance in a society "promotes the establishment and reinforcement of hierarchies, the exclusion of anyone who differs from the implicit norms of the liberal subject and the passivity of the individual" (Voelz 114). These aspects are against the New Americanist's idea of deconstructive pluralism and hence, not encouraged.

Simultaneously, it is a socially centered fact that Emerson's idea of individualism and selfhood requires resisting any sort of social relations with other individuals of the society. Hence, it is more or less based upon what Emerson has demonstrated as moral perfectionism, which is unachievable in the society. In other words, the vision of Emerson regarding establishing an ideal American society is unapproachable. Likewise, one of the critics has also defined Emerson's idea of individualism in a society, reflecting the stance that it is nearly impossible to achieve. In his words, he asserts that "Emerson knew-and in "Experience" owned-that the freedom of individualism, the freedom of self- possession, is finally the freedom to be isolated, alone, adrift in the vacuum of autonomy” (Wolfe 154).

Thus, one would argue that society would not fully function if the teachings of Emerson were to be followed. The American society would fall into chaos, and the functional society, as we know it today, would be destroyed. However, the idea of being self-reliant is one that would encourage people to work hard and avoid the adverse effects of depending on other people to determine their fate. People would work hard on their own terms, and the pressure that has led the American society to have many such cases of depression and suicide rates would subside. The unhealthy competition for the limited resources would also stop. Thus, despite the negative consequences that would arise from adopting the author's principles, positive effects would also be observed.

# **Works Cited**

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