

Emerson's Concept of God.

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Introduction:

The Revolutionary ideas not settled in mainstream of American Society by 1830's institution of slavery and exploitation of working class prevail in the society meaningful freedom and equality had to be attained in America. The groups of first intellectuals in America were eager to transform American's institutions to fit the ideas of the democracy. The intellectual's centering about concord and Boston, accepted the title "Transcendentalists".

In it's hoped for reformation for society this group felt a special intellectual challenge from the elder scholars who scoffed at the possibility of ordinary persons establishing moral and religious truths for themselves. According to Calvinistic tradition God's will and indeed God's very existence could be reliably ascertained only by a specially educated scholars. Trained to interpret scriptures and to think correctly.

The transcendentalist disagreed with the Calvinistic ideology (or) Assumptions and they argued that. Since nature was the expression of God's will, the more freely one could attend to one's nature the more sure his more judgments; more over since nature was accessible to all, God's will must be open to all.

The transcendentalists adopted new approach to judging reality, one in which the discovery of God's will.... and indeed God's existence ... would be accessible to everyone.

Emerson the father of American transcendentalism attempted to articulate the new metaphysical viewpoint, and from it to develop a philosophical accessible to God's existence that might serve to ground a moral's befitting the new democracy. This study concerns his treatment of the question of god's existence.

From the very beginning Emerson regarded the God of Calvinism with an air of dissatisfaction and this dissatisfaction was mainly based on two reasons. First, he found the presence of suffering in the world irreconcilable with the Calvinistic belief in the goodness and omnipotence of God. If God really is what he is believed to be, Emerson asked, why does he permit suffering to exist in the world? The very existence of suffering, he contended, " is the first and chief difficulty in the way of the belief of an omnipotent good principle", for ' If we supposed the character of the author to be unmixed goodness, the work must be like wise pure".(The journals and miscellaneous notebooks, I, 92). This led Emerson to think that either God is not good or, if he is good at all, there is some other force which brings about suffering in the world, and there by poses a challenge to his omnipotence. God's failure to keep suffering out of the world, Emerson observes, "subtracts... omnipotence ... from the qualities of the forming being ... that is ... demonstrates him not to be God (The journals and miscellaneous note books, I, 92: I 822). He thus seems to suggest that it

is futile to count upon a God who lacks the capacity to protect the innocent from the malignancy of a rival force.

Secondly, Emerson found it hard to accept the Calvinistic distinction between God's revealed will and his secret will with the consequent conclusion that the purpose of God is unknowable. Since this ambiguity of divine intention involved uncertainty about man's ultimate fate, Emerson was assailed with the sinister apprehension that he might be damned despite his sincerest efforts to do God's will as revealed in the scriptures.

The Calvinistic God thus became for Emerson an object of fear, which led him to strike a cautionary note; "His allseeing eye is upon ... and in his immediate presence we now charge you fear him". (The journals and miscellaneous note books, I, 92: I 822). This fear was further aggravated by Emerson's early Calvinistic belief which stressed the object insignificance of man.

Any attempt on man's part, Emerson believed, to pry into God's secret design will not only be hopelessly futile in view of his miserably inadequate faculties, but may even provoke divine wrath to his utter perdition.

This mystery of divine will in relation to man's conduct spelled Emerson's dark despair. "Life", he writes in a somber mood, is wasted in the necessary preparation in which "is the true way, and we die just as we enter it". (Journals and miscellaneous note book II, 219: 1824). Emerson was thus led to infer that God is an arbitrary power which governs the world by sheer intimidation. "Annihilation," he observes in a mordant tone, "is a prerogative of God". (Journals and miscellaneous note book II, 66: 1822). To Emerson, God's imposition of his arbitrary will on man by virtue of his enormous power become indistinguishable from tyranny. Obviously, there was little reason to suppose that God's judgement of man could be fair if the latter was kept in dark about what was expected of him. Emerson thus found "Calvin's deity... a foe to that capacity of order and right, to that understanding which is made in us arbiter of things," and therefore unacceptable. He strikes a rebellious note of rejection in the observation that "I cannot help revolting from the double deity" whom Emerson pejoratively dubs a "gross gothic off spring of some Genevan school". (Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, II, 32 -33: 1824). Later he poignantly reiterates this defiant rejection of an intimidating God in an exultant strain of self vindication when he commends such dauntless men (indirectly including himself among them) "who rise refreshed on hearing a threat". (The Complete works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, I, 149).

However, the rejection of a Calvinistic deity did not destroy his faith in God. It simply drove him inward to discover a God. Whose conduct squared with man's sense of injustice. He affirms:

We certainly can conceive that the divinity may govern a being by some law which we have to faculties to understand... differing entirely from our system but not contradicting it; just as our senses differ

from, but do not exclude each other. (The Journals and Miscellaneous Note books of Ralph Waldo Emerson, II, 6: 1822).

Emerson's belief in the righteousness of God received some nourishment, from rational Unitarianism. Dr. William Ellery Channing, a prominent exponent of Unitarian faith, alleged that since man derives his existence from God, the rationality of man reflects the rationality of God. He therefore contended that divine will cannot be inconsistent with man's rational sense of justice. The Unitarian reassurance did not last long in Emerson's case. In the twenties he was beginning to show signs of dissatisfaction with it for he began to realize that reason could not provide adequate basis for his belief. Man's rational faculty, Emerson contended, operates under the influence of subtle and deep seated prejudices; it cannot be therefore regarded as a dependable guide to the will of God. On the contrary, he thought, it might just as well lead to skepticism, and David Hume supplied him with an appropriate illustration of his contention. (Two Unpublished Essays, the Character of Socrates, the present State of Ethical Philosophy, 67 – 69). In the summer of 1823 Emerson writes: "We gather an important inference that intellectual nature does not take the first rank in the scale of excellence. (The Journals and Miscellaneous note books of Ralph Waldo Emerson, II, 149). And that "the intellectual path is devious and grotesque". (The Journals and Miscellaneous note books of Ralph Waldo Emerson, II, 145).

Further, Emerson realized that rationality and justice do not always go together since reason has an uncanny knack of investing even a most heinous act with semblance of plausibility, and thereby making it look just. A rational God, Emerson therefore thought, does not necessarily make a just God; if God has a rationale for benevolence and justice, as Channing alleged, he can also have a rationale, if he so wills, for tyranny and injustice. The Unitarian idea of a rational God, Emerson felt, still leaves ample room for God's arbitrary discretion in respect of his dealings with his creatures Emerson thus came to believe that divine operation is not a matter of rationality, but of moral principle which implies an inherent disposition to a positive code of conduct. He proclaimed that "God is essentially a moral being, for such is the information respecting him which we derive from ... for all our conceptions (The Journals and Miscellaneous note books of Ralph Waldo Emerson, II, 6" 1822). And that "Justice and benevolence are his nature" rather than determined by his rationality Journals and Miscellaneous note books of Ralph Waldo Emerson, II, 50:1822. Emerson thus concludes that a moral God, unlike a rational being, cannot to do otherwise than to act according to his moral nature.

There are many things which being contrary to the nature of things are impossible to any power, even to omnipotence. Thus we commonly say that the deity himself cannot annihilate space and duration. If we knew more of the nature of things we could add more to the list of impossible things. (Journals and Miscellaneous note books of Ralph Waldo Emerson II 61:1822).

The statement reflects Emerson's tendency to shift the emphasis from the divine person to the moral law which is inviolable and knows no deviation or exception. This tendency was inherent in Emerson and occasionally manages to break through the crust of Calvinism which overlaid it in the early period. We find Emerson in the early period referring to God by such abstract terms as "the unseen spirit". (Journals and Miscellaneous note books of Ralph Waldo Emerson, II, 87:1823). "Single intelligent principle" and the moral sense. (The Journals and Miscellaneous note books, II, 49 : 1822). Which signal his propensity to relegate the personal God to a secondary position. Another statement made in 1822 shows still more explicitly Emerson's inclination to treat God as a moral abstraction rather than a personal entity :

To have an origin in us, the virtue or the sense of injustice must have previously existed in him. The law itself implies a sanction and consequences which are infinite in their extent and duration. (The Journals and Miscellaneous note books, II, 50).

" Justice" with a capital J and the reference to God as " the law" strongly indicate that Emerson tends to place more emphasis on the moral attributes of God than his person. In another journal entry of the same period Emerson comes close to attributing a status of sovereignty to this law or " the immutable rule" established " from eternity to ... guide the actions of all intelligent beings", and brings God down to the position of a mere observer or, as he puts it, " the eye, which observes, and the tribunal, which judges, of the good or observance of that law (The Journals and Miscellaneous note books, I, 153). The movement of Emerson's thought places increasing emphasis on the independence of the moral law from the divine person, which eventually culminates in the dispensability of the latter. Emerson came to believe fairly early in his career that the moral law itself metes out punishment and reward in the form of a retributive effect contingent upon its observance or defiance by a person, and therefore needs no external " Eye" or " tribunal" to administer judgment on its behalf. The law, Emerson emphasized, "inseparably connects character to its rewards". (The Journals and Miscellaneous note books, II,51 : 1822). That there is an "Eternal adjustment of things" and virtue and voice are requited in equal "measure".

Emerson's further maintains that the idea of a personal God derives from one's " perception" of the moral law (The Journals and Miscellaneous note books, III, 434: Jan.1835). and undergoes a modification according to the change in the level of that perception. Different concepts of a personal God projected in different creeds like Calvinism and Unitarianism, Emerson thus holds, are "the imperfect version" of the same law. (Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, III. 199: Sept. 1833). Thus while the idea of a personal God keeps changing, the moral law, which forms the basis of that idea, remains unchanged. ' It must be owned, " states Emerson." That the idea of God in the human mind is a very changing luminary... the moral sentiments (on the other hand) are immutable". Thus the very existence of a personal God becomes dependent on the moral principle, and is therefore discarded by Emerson in favour of the latter in a manner which can be called a transcendental version of catechism.

It is thus evident that by the early thirties Emerson had distinctly defined his concept of God as signifying an impersonal principle of being, which sharply marks it off from the theological concept of an anthropomorphic deity. Emerson maintained this concept consistently to the end.

The resignation of his pulpit in 1832 set Emerson free from the obligations to the church. This freedom, as the lines written soon after the resignation testify, meant to Emerson the fulfillment of a cherished desire to “lay out my own road”. And “be free” which, he thought. I cannot be While I take things as others please to rate them. (Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, II, 518).

As Perry Miller points out, after 1832 Emerson shows a growing preference for impersonal terms in reference to the ultimate being over the term “God” the latter with its theological ring, Emerson thought, indicated a personal, localized deity, and thereby belied his concept of God as a universal principle of being. In 1835 he specifically maintains that God is pure spiritual energy which “refuses to be... personified” (Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, III, 52.6). In “nature” written in 1836 he calls God by such impersonal terms as the “universal soul” and “spirit”. (The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, I, 27) In 1837 he underscores his belief in an impersonal God by asking a question “is God a person?” to which he categorically answers . No that is a contradiction the personality of God. A person is finite personality, is finiteness. (Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, IV, 185). In 1838 he strongly affirms, “I deny personality to God because it is too little, and not too much”.

Elsewhere Emerson calls God the “nameless thought, the nameless power, the super – personal heart”. (The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson VI, 241). Later in his career (around 1851) when asked by his cousin David Haskins what he thought of God, Emerson answered that “when I speak of God, I prefer to say It ... It.” Emerson believed that being the all God cannot be confined to the limiting category of a personal distinction (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 2.3.6). As we have seen, from the very beginning Emerson was proceeding along the line which led straight to the impersonal concept of over soul.

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