

Individualism and Nonconformity in Ralph Waldo Emerson's 'Self-Reliance'

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Individualism and Nonconformity in Ralph Waldo Emerson's 'Self-Reliance'

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Introduction

As a student pursuing graduate study and a career in academia, you have to believe in yourself and your words. In our constant fight against Imposter Syndrome, believing in yourself, your beliefs, and your thoughts is crucial to participate in systems that are far larger than any single individual. Growing up, I was always told to follow rules, believe in what your superiors (teachers, bosses, parents) told you, and speak when spoken to. But what type of person would these parameters produce? Surely not a person who can contribute to the ever-expanding, constantly clashing, ocean of information that is academia. Dr. Lindholdt recently told me in a meeting, “we write to incite social change.” And to do my part, I created this presentation in an effort to shake the foundation of a conformist society. Meaning, I want to alleviate the pressure for any and all people who find themselves pressured to think one way or another and outline how we can create a sense of purpose and belonging in our individual pursuits to find our truth.

Methods

This research was born through Dr. Paul Lindholdt’s ENGL343: Survey of American Literature course this past Fall Quarter. The class was assigned Emerson’s *Self-Reliance* with the given prompt:

According to Emerson in "Self-Reliance," what is genius? How does his extended definition relate to his belief in individualism and nonconformity? Be sure to consult the etymology of the word in Latin.

In order to fulfill the requirements of the prompt, I consulted the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) for their concise etymology. Here, I found that *genius* had various definitions throughout history, but two stood out as the most foundational:

1. a “spirit attendant... in the divine or spiritual part of each individual,”
2. “personification of the individual’s natural desires and appetites.”

A bit different from our current understanding of a smartass.

Using these definitions, I explore how Emerson uses genius to centralize his support for *Self-reliance*, namely by

1. using our 1st definition,(a spirit attendant in the divine part of each individual,) to empower the individual by equating the spirit to our individual discretion, and bestowing a sense of control on the individual in the uncontrollable world
2. And, using our 2nd definition, “the personification of the individual’s natural desires and appetites,” to adhere to man’s inherent desire for community by showing how a harmonious relationship with human thought and nature can be found through nonconformity.

To further drive these contentions, I will also consult two pivotal Roman philosophical figures, Varro and Marcus Aurelius.

And to preface, Emerson’s subject throughout *Self-Reliance* is “man.” At the time of writing, we can rightfully assume, as a white-dude in the 19th century, he meant to speak only to men. But I’m not Emerson and I’d prefer that all of you, whoever and whatever you are, take what I say today and utilize it accordingly.

Speech

According to Emerson, genius is “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men” (Emerson 31). The OED outlines the etymology of “genius,” and though its definition has evolved and differs explicitly from Emerson’s, the varied meanings frame his argument dutifully. The Latin derived outlook of a spirit attendant provides the individual a sense of control in an uncontrollable world, while the contribution of each individual’s expression furnishes harmony and belonging within the community of human thought and nature.

The etymology of genius as a spiritual guide reinforces Emerson's stance on individualism, namely by qualifying the spirit, or as I argue, the individual's discretion, as all-powerful and constant. Equating the spirit to our individual discretion is not my original argument, but instead, an ancient one. In Augustine of Hippo's theological [tree-tuhs] treatise, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, from 426 AD, Varro attributes the rational powers and abilities of every human being to their genius (271, Internet Archive). Thus, I will use discretion and the spirit interchangeably. To further articulate the similarities, this "spirit attendant" from the original definition, was said to overlook and guide its host body, the individual (OED 1). This guidance is akin to the autodidactic process of absorbing information and deciphering between the complementary and non-complementary, which Emerson elucidates.

The author explains, "though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till" (Emerson 31). The poet lays it clearly: in order to bring something to fruition, you must absorb all the elements around you and work. In relation to the spirit, it is vital that one uses their own discretion to filter through these kernels. It is vital for a person to familiarize themselves with the "plot of ground" by educating themselves, then with their individual toil, synthesizing their truth. That is progress. After exploring the aforementioned "plot of ground," Emerson continues: "the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it. A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition, as if everything were titular and ephemeral but he" (Emerson 32). Emerson puts power in the individual's hands. The genius, or in this case, our discretion, should be perceived as more authoritative and constant than any other exterior party. Discretion is the individual's single semblance of control in a world commanded by nature, or the uncontrollable. The individual must use this power to decide the right and wrong. And I'm confident that we've all had the agonizing experience of speaking as the intellectual minority, perceiving a "loss of community," and being subjected to some projected Otherness by our peers. Emerson acknowledges this awkward, arguably unnatural event, of sticking out. But, it is this social protrusion that is most necessary and natural in human development.

Genius has also been defined as the “personification of a person’s natural appetites” (OED 1), and in terms of Emerson’s genius, man’s inherent appetite to be consistent and belong in a collective reinforces the importance of self-reliance. Emerson tackles the internal issue of inconsistency in humans: “Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said to-day.—‘Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.’—Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood?” (Emerson 34). Consistency plagues the individual on a daily basis. Humans feel compelled to think one way, whether that’s caused by the affection of others or the self-imposed pressure to be a one-minded, uncomplicated person. Emerson challenges this misconception by amending the belief, “the [misunderstood] actions will be harmonious, however unlike they seem” (Emerson 34). These thoughts, in which humans internalize, are vital to the harmony of nature. Humans naturally desire to belong, and though individualism and nonconformity act in discordance to the collective thought, the individual’s misunderstood thoughts contribute to the harmony of nature. Passively agreeing and avoiding confrontation would be detrimental to development. Contributing to the chaos of conflicting thought is harmony in its most natural, beautiful form. There’s an excellent quote from Marcus Aurelius’ self-reflection journal-turned autobiography *Meditations* which articulates this same message. The quote is:

If mind [and reason are] common to us all... The universe is a kind of community. In what else could one say that the whole human race shares a constitution? (pg. 24, *Meditations*)

Your home is in human nature and you are always welcome. In fact, you are always there.

Call-to-Action

We can use etymology, and Emerson's *Self-Reliance* as a means to reflect on ourselves and incite social change. It is the job of literature, and its respective scholars, to cultivate the seedlings of personal fulfillment found within the pages. When we look into a work like *Self-Reliance*, we can legitimize the individualism we seek and provide community to those who are seeking. This spirit guide and our discretion are able to bestow upon us, fallible humans, a sense of control in this uncontrollable world. Use it as you will. The contribution of each individual's expression is key to being one with nature: it is nature. It is the human responsibility to disrupt the collective thought and rekindle the fire when expression has gone dim.

What would the world look like if half of the spoken ideas had never been spoken at all?

Conclusion

Personally and selfishly, this research gave me a new sense of self. A healthier and ambitious one. Too many times in my life, I've felt that my own thoughts and beliefs weren't enough to share. And so many times, I wish that past-Brendan could see what I'm doing right now. Upon rereading *Self-Reliance* for this presentation, I found a quote that I'd like to finish this presentation with:

"Trust thyself:[156] every heart vibrates to that iron string... Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception [and] that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not minors and invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers, and benefactors, advancing on Chaos and the Dark."