

## **Self-Reliance**

by **Ralph Waldo Emerson**

In his essay “Self-Reliance,” Emerson begins with a definition of **genius**, a quality which he says he recently encountered in a poem written by an eminent painter. Genius is to “believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men.” Moses, Plato, and Milton had this quality of disregarding tradition and speaking their own thoughts, but most people dismiss these thoughts, only to recognize them later in works of acknowledged genius.

At some point, every individual realizes that “imitation is suicide.” One’s own powers of perception and creativity are the most important gifts, and one can only be happy by putting one’s heart into the work at hand. Great individuals have always accepted their position in the age in which they lived and trusted their own ability to make the best of it. Children, and even animals, also have this enviable power of certitude in their undivided minds.

Society requires conformity from its citizens, but to be a self-reliant individual is to be a nonconformist. “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.” Concepts such as good and evil, with which many people are accustomed to label their thoughts, are meaningless so long as people are true to themselves. Most people are swayed by irrelevant matters, such as how their conduct appears to others. The appearance of virtue is often a penance, which people perform because they think it makes them fit to live in the world, not because it expresses their true natures. It is easy to be independent when one is alone, but the great individual retains the independence of solitude even when surrounded by others.

If one conforms, it is impossible for others to know one’s deeper self. One becomes like a lawyer speaking on someone else’s behalf, and everything one says is predictable and inauthentic. Conformity is tempting, because nonconformity angers others, but also because people want to be consistent, which means sticking to former opinions rather than thinking independently. However, one should not be any more concerned with what one used to think than with what others think now. “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds,” as Emerson puts it. One should not fear being misunderstood, for this was the fate of many of the greatest individuals in history. “To be great is to be misunderstood.”

An individual should aim to be great on their own terms, rather than trying to gain the approval of others who have achieved greatness. However magnificent a building, book, or work of art may be, one should not be overwhelmed by it but consider it an object to be judged and appreciated. “The picture waits for my verdict: it is not to command me, but I am to settle its claims to praise.” People have generally paid great respect to kings, such as Alexander the Great, but the best lesson to learn is not to venerate such people but to adopt their attitude to the world.

The source of the self on which one must rely is generally called Spontaneity, Instinct, or Intuition. It might also be described as the Soul. It is the means by which one may discern justice and wisdom and receive inspiration directly from God, without recourse to texts, teachings, and traditions, which only confuse matters and prevent one from perceiving the truth clearly. People generally do not have the courage of their convictions and prefer to quote some authority rather than saying what they think. Even plants are not so timid: roses are simply themselves, without making any references to former or better roses. To be happy and strong, people must live in the present, as roses do.

The authorities that people quote did not themselves rely on authority. Those like King David lived with God, as everyone else should. The highest truth and the greatest good cannot be learned from books or teachers, and when one encounters them, they will be unfamiliar. Such transcendent matters cannot be expressed in words, which is why the term “self-reliance” is itself inadequate. They cannot be encountered in a mob, either, but require solitude and contemplation. The quiet of a church before the service begins is of more value than the preaching.

Most people think that to reject society’s standards is to reject all standards. However, one’s own standards will be more exacting than popular ethics. There is something godlike in the individual who can trust their own mind completely. The ethics society professes are primarily based on fear, and what it calls prayer is either a begging for favors or an expression of regret.

There is no substitute for self-reliance. Adherence to a creed is merely stultifying, the mindless idolization of classification over content. Educated Americans often think they can improve their minds through travel. However, the men who shaped the societies of Greece and Rome did not travel themselves. “The soul is no traveller; the wise man stays at home,” as Emerson phrases it. Traveling is a sign of restlessness, and this is as true mentally as it is physically, when Americans seek to imitate European taste. Imitation is always fatal to genius, Emerson insists. “Every great man is unique... Shakespeare will never be made by

the study of Shakespeare.”Men often pride themselves on the advance of society, but this is an illusion. Society continually changes, but it recedes in one way as quickly as it advances in another and never truly improves. Civilized people have more possessions and learning than savages but less health and strength. The same is true in the moral sphere. The great thinkers of history were individuals and did not create moral progress for the masses, since morality is an individual matter and cannot be taught.

Emerson concludes by saying that most of the things people care about are ultimately unimportant, and relying on them merely demonstrates a failure of self-reliance:

A political victory, a rise of rents, the recovery of your sick, or the return of your absent friend, or some other favorable event, raises your spirits, and you think good days are preparing for you. Do not believe it. Nothing can bring you peace but yourself.No external events which are the result of good or bad fortune affect what is essential in the individual. What is vital is to remain true to oneself and follow one’s own principles.

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### **Summary and Analysis of Self-Reliance**

Self-Reliance was first published in 1841 in his collection, *Essays: First Series*. However, scholars argue the underlying philosophy of his essay emerged in a sermon given in September 1830 - a month after his first marriage to Ellen (who died the following year of tuberculosis) - and in lectures on the philosophy of history given at Boston's Masonic Temple from 1836 to 1837.

The essay, for which Emerson is perhaps the most well-known, contains the most thorough statement of Emerson's emphasis on the need for individuals to avoid conformity and false consistency, and instead follow their own instincts and ideas. The essay illustrates Emerson's finesse for synthesizing and translating classical philosophy (e.g., self-rule in Stoicism, the *Bildung* of Goethe, and the revolution of Kant) into accessible language, and for demonstrating its relevance to everyday life.

While Emerson does not formally do so, scholars conventionally organize *Self-Reliance* into three sections: the value of and barriers to self-reliance (paragraph 1-17), self-reliance and the individual (paragraph 18-32), and self-reliance and society (paragraph 33-50).

### **The Value of and Barriers to Self-Reliance (paragraph 1-17)**

Emerson opens his essay with the assertion, "To believe in your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, - that is genius." His statement captures the essence of what he means by "self-reliance," namely the reliance upon one's own thoughts and ideas. He argues individuals, like Moses, Plato, and Milton, are held in the highest regard because they spoke what they thought. They did not rely on the words of others, books, or tradition. Unfortunately, few people today do so; instead, "he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his."

If we do not listen to our own mind, someone else will say what we think and feel, and "we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another." Emerson thus famously counsels his reader to "Trust thyself." In other words, to accept one's destiny, "the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events." If such advice seems easier said than done, Emerson prompts his reader to recall the boldness of youth.

Their mind being whole, their eye is as yet unconquered, and when we look in their faces we are disconcerted. Infancy conforms to nobody; all conform to it; so that one babe commonly makes four or five out of the adults who prattle and play to it. So God has armed youth and puberty and manhood no less with its own piquancy and charm, and made it enviable and gracious and its claims not be put by, if it will stand by itself.

The difficulty of trusting our own mind lies in the conspiracy of society against the individual, for society valorizes conformity. As a youth, we act with independence and irresponsibility, and issue verdicts based on our genuine thought. We are unencumbered by thoughts about consequences or interests. However, as we grow older, society teaches us to curb our thoughts and actions, seek the approval of others, and concern ourselves with names, reputations, and customs. What some would call "maturity," Emerson would call "conformity."

To be a self-reliant individual then, one must return to the neutrality of youth, and be a nonconformist. For a nonconformist, "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 does not advocate nonconformity for the sake of rebellion per se, but rather so the world may know you for who are, and so you may focus your time and efforts on reinforcing your character in your own terms.

However, the valorization of conformity by society is not the only barrier to self-reliance. According to Emerson, another barrier is the fear for our own consistency: "a reverence for our past act or word because the eyes of others have no other data for computing our orbit than our past acts, and we are loth to disappoint them." Rather than act with a false consistency to a past memory, we must always live in the present. We must become, rather than simply be. Emerson famously argues, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines." While acting without regard to consistency may lead to us being misunderstood, the self-reliant individual would be in good company. "Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood."

## **Self-Reliance and the Individual (paragraph 18-32)**

In this section, Emerson expounds on how individuals can achieve self-reliance. As mentioned earlier, to live self-reliantly with genuine thought and action, one must "trust thyself." In other words, one must trust in the nature and power of our inherent capacity for independence, what Emerson calls, "Spontaneity" or "Instinct" - the "essence of genius, of virtue, and of life." This Spontaneity or Instinct is grounded in our Intuition, our inner knowledge, rather than "tuitions," the secondhand knowledge we learn from others. In turn, Emerson believed our Intuition emerged from the relationship between our soul and the divine spirit (i.e., God). To trust thyself means to also trust in God.

To do so is more difficult than it sounds. It is far easier to follow the footprints of others, to live according to some known or accustomed way. A self-reliant life "shall be wholly strange and new. It shall exclude example and experience. You take the way from man, not to man." As such, one must live as courageously as a rose.

Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not say, "I think," "I am," but instead quotes some saint or sage. He is ashamed before the blade of grass or the blowing rose. These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God today. There is no time to them. There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence... But man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future. He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time.

To live in the present with nature and God, one must not worry about the past or future, compare oneself to others, or rely on words and thoughts not one's own.

## **Self-Reliance and Society (paragraph 33-50)**

In the concluding paragraphs of Self-Reliance, Emerson argues self-reliance must be applied to all aspects of life, and illustrates how such an application would benefit society. "It is easy to see that a greater self-reliance must work a revolution in all the offices and relations of men; in their religion; in their education; in their pursuits; their modes of living; their association; in their property; in their speculative views."

In regard to religion, Emerson believes a lack of self-reliance has led prayers to become “a disease of the will” and creeds “a disease of the intellect.” People pray to an external source for some foreign addition to their life, whereby prayer acts as a means to a private end, such as for a desired commodity. In this way, prayer has become a form of begging. However, prayer should be a way to contemplate life and unite with God (i.e., to trust thyself and also in God). Self-reliant individuals do not pray for something, but rather embody prayer (i.e., contemplation and unification with God) in all their actions. “The prayer of the farmer kneeling in his field to weed it, the prayer of the rower kneeling with the stroke of his oar, are true prayers heard throughout nature, though for cheap ends.”

Emerson also believes true prayer involves an avoidance of regret and discontent, which indicate a personal “infirmity of will,” as well as of sympathy for the suffering of others, which only prolongs their own infirmity, and instead should be handled with truth and health to return them to their reason.

As for creeds, his critique focuses on how those who cling to creeds obey the beliefs of a powerful mind other than their own, rather than listen to how God speaks through their own minds. In this way, they disconnect with the universe, with God, because the creed becomes mistaken for the universe.

In regard to education, Emerson asserts the education system fosters a restless mind that causes people to travel away from themselves in hope of finding something greater than what they know or have. Educated Americans desire to travel to foreign places like Italy, England, and Egypt for amusement and culture. They build and decorate their houses with foreign taste, their minds to the Past and the Distant. Artists imitate the Doric or the Gothic model. Yet, Emerson reminds us, “They who made England, Italy, or Greece venerable in the imagination, did so by sticking fast where they were, like an axis of the earth.” One should not yearn for or imitate that which is foreign to oneself, for “Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life’s cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another you have only an extemporaneous half possession... Every great man is unique.” (Emerson develops these ideas further in his essay, *The American Scholar*, which calls for the creation of a uniquely American cultural identity distinct from European traditions.)

Finally, Emerson addresses the “spirit of society.” According to Emerson, “society never advances.” Civilization has not led to the improvement of society because with the acquisition of new arts and technologies comes the loss of old instincts. For example, “The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet... He has a fine Geneva watch, but he fails of the skill to tell the hour by

the sun.” Society merely changes and shifts like a wave. While a “wave moves onward... the water which it is composed does not.” As such, people are no greater than they ever were, and should not smugly rest on the laurels of past artistic and scientific achievements. They must instead actively work to achieve self-reliance, which entails a return to oneself, and liberation from the shackles of the religious, learned, and civil institutions that create a debilitating reliance on property (i.e., things external from the self).

Emerson concludes, “Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles.”

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