

Education for the Gleam of Light:
Emerson's Transcendentalism and its
Implications for Contemporary Moral Education

Naoko Saito
University of Tokyo

WHAT CHOICE IS THERE BEYOND SELFISH INDIVIDUALISM?
THE DILEMMA IN MORAL EDUCATION

In this age of value diversification and moral uncertainty, our dilemma is the tension between our undeniable wish for personal satisfaction and the need to acknowledge the diverse goods of others. In the absence of any absolute moral values, personal measures often guide our daily moral choices. However, as the contemporary problems of the young demonstrate, this pattern can easily lead to a narrowly ego-centered, selfish individualism. In response, moral education today emphasizes care for others,¹ the service of the community, the awareness of a common cultural good, and in its more reactionary form, the reinforcement of social control.² This alternative, however, can easily take an oppressive form, and in the worst case, become a moral totalitarianism inhibiting individual freedom. This extreme alternative is as dangerous as egoism since there certainly is a need for a strong ethic of self-reliance, especially today when many young people lose the will to be responsible creators of a better life and society. The question is: Is there another choice beyond selfish individualism? A pressing question for moral education today is how to maintain a space for individual freedom to focus on one's self, to be oneself, while releasing the self toward a larger common aim beyond a narrow egocentrism, and to do this without suppression. A vision of moral education is needed to cultivate an individual who can satisfy these conflicting needs and live a holistic moral life. As one such possibility, this essay presents a mediating standpoint: Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendentalism. Emerson is usually considered to be a progenitor of American individualism. His transcendentalism, however, fuses an ethic of self-reliance with a transcendence of narrow egocentrism. I would like to show that Emerson's transcendental notion of *the gleam of light* is central to his holistic ethic for human perfection and gives us a fresh perspective from which to reexamine moral education today.

EMERSON'S TRANSCENDENTALISM AND THE GLEAM OF LIGHT

Emerson says that "there is no such thing as a Transcendental *party*; that there is no pure Transcendentalist."³ His transcendentalism is elusive, being composed of diverse elements. Russell B. Goodman calls Emerson a "transcendental idealist," who is also an "empiricist."⁴ Arthur Versluis interprets Emerson's thought as "assimilationism" with "a German mystical, a Vedantic, or even a Platonic origin."⁵ One way to approach the amorphous nature of Emerson's transcendentalism is to interpret it as a hybrid of the spiritual and the natural, or what he calls "the transcendentalism of common life."⁶ As John Dewey says, Emerson's transcendentalism as idealism serves "the common experience of the everyday man," in "the Here and Now," rather than any higher "Reality" in "the There and Then."⁷

Above all, Emerson's concept of "the gleam of light" embodies the intriguing nature of his transcendentalism. He begins "Self-Reliance" with a poem by Beaumont and Fletcher:

Man is his own star and the soul that can
Render an honest and a perfect man,
Commands all light, all influence, all fate.⁸

As this poem announces, "Self-Reliance" is an essay on the perfection of human life, symbolized by the image of light. Emerson continues: "A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages" (SR, 131). The "gleam of light" symbolizes the irresistible sense of one's being. As our own "spontaneous impression," it is a source of self-reliance that we trust even when "the whole cry of voices is on the other side." It is an "iron string" to which our heart vibrates, symbolizing "the integrity of [your] own mind" (SR, 132-33).⁹

The gleam of light is also a metaphor of one's "soul." In Plato, the light symbolizes the state of the soul enlightened outside the cave — the immortal soul distinguished from man's mortal body. St. Augustine also uses "light" to signify the idea of the Christian God — "the true Light which enlightens every soul born into the world."¹⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his discussion of the "sentiment of existence," also conjures up the image of light.¹¹ They associate light with our inner sense of being and the perfect state of the soul. While Emerson inherits these spiritual traditions, his gleam of light has a distinctively American hue: it is natural and pragmatic.

Emerson refuses to associate the gleam of light with the eternal, immortal realm of Being. Instead, the gleam of light belongs to nature and earthly life. To illustrate this, Emerson offers the example of a rose:

Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not say "I think," "I am," but 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 to-day. There is no time to them. There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence (SR, 141).

As a part of nature, the rose teaches us that the essence of self-reliance is to be who we are, and that appreciating our sense of being is to fully live this moment. This represents Emerson's panpsychic oneness with nature, the "common origin" of life, which he says all beings share as the source of the gleam of light (SR, 139-40). Though he calls it "God," it is not God in the traditional religious sense, but rather oneness that "dwells in the hour that now is, in the earnest experience of the common day."¹²

Another synonym of the gleam of light, "Whim," also suggests the naturalistic aspect of the spiritual light. Emerson says: "I shun father and mother and wife and brother, when my genius calls me. I would write on the lintels of the door-post, *Whim*. I hope it is somewhat better than whim at last" (SR, 134). Here "Whim" is our undeniably spontaneous "Instinct," but one that is fully earthbound. "[T]hese impulses may be from below, not from above," as Stanley Cavell reminds us. They are nothing sacred, but something sensuous that we experience from within our body

as our natural drive for life.¹³ Dewey inherits this naturalistic aspect of Emerson's gleam of light as "subconscious stirrings."¹⁴ Whim is a source of a non-conforming spirit of criticism. Emerson's example of a nonchalant boy, who is engaged in critical judgment by following his original impressions, illustrates this point (*SR*, 133).

Further, the gleam of light is pragmatic. Richard Poirier gives a functional, pragmatic interpretation of Emerson's "soul"; it is not an entity, but a creative power of humans to expand new horizons.¹⁵ Indeed, Emerson says, "the soul *becomes*" (*SR*, 142). The gleam of light represents the dynamic trajectories of life as "my being and becoming" (*SR*, 140); it never stays the same, but grows. Emerson's view of the universe is not of a static, pre-given whole; rather, it is of a whole expanding in "circles" (*C*, 167), whose meaning is progressively discovered through the movement of the central light.

Emerson is a proto-pragmatist when he says that "I am only an experimenter. . . . I unsettle all things" (*C*, 173). Though indispensable to the beginning of moral life, the gleam of light is not an intrinsic, fixed source of goodness. Rather, it is a mixture of potential good and bad. In Cavell's words, the meaning of Whim is "to be proven only on the way, by the way" and, further, whim is "prophetic."¹⁶ In Emerson's quasi-contingent view of the universe where "there is always a residuum unknown, unanalyzable" (*C*, 168), the prophetic light is a crucial source of the self-trust needed to venture out into the world of uncertainty. It is a symbol of the "power and courage to make a new road to new and better goals" (*C*, 175).

Finally, while being an original and impulsive drive, the gleam of light is not a mere burst of emotion or hedonistic satisfaction of desire. It must be watched, nurtured, and guided along the path of its growth. This is what Emerson means by "tuitions" as the unfolding passage of intuitions (*SR*, 139). Cavell claims that Emerson reverses a classical Kantian distinction in his picturing of the intellectual hemisphere of knowledge as passive or receptive and the intuitive or instinctual hemisphere as active or spontaneous;¹⁷ the distinction is overcome in what Cavell characterizes as Emerson's "receptive thinking."¹⁸ While being intuitive and immediate, the gleam of light is an ingredient of Emerson's "Man Thinking."¹⁹ It is a nexus of the original drives and consequent actions, emotion and reason, and the receptive and the active phases of human experience.

Thus, the gleam of light, which epitomizes Emerson's transcendentalism, has as its metaphysical ground an intriguing combination of being and becoming, the spiritual, the natural, and the pragmatic, and the individual and the whole. It is a mediation of opposing factors in our life.

KILLING THE GLEAM OF LIGHT

The concrete implications of Emerson's transcendentalism, however, are not easy to grasp. Unfortunately, the gleam of light exhibits its meaning most strikingly against the backdrop of darkness; we come to learn its luminosity when we lose it. Emerson recognizes how precarious, and hence, precious the gleam of light is: "These are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible

as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members” (*SR*, 133). This suggests Emerson’s tragic sense and nonconformist claim against the social conspiracy of suppressing the gleam of light. To hold on to one’s light, Emerson even chooses to be “the Devil’s child” (*Ibid.*, 134).

Dewey helps us understand Emerson’s thought in the context of modern democracy: “But it is not easy to detect and watch the gleams of light that flash from within. Education and social surroundings are in a conspiracy to dim these flashes” (*CC*, 139). As a critic of modernity and capitalism, Dewey deplored in the early twentieth century the “tragedy of the ‘lost individual.’”²⁰ It is a crisis of spiritual conformity in modern democracy that causes the incapacity of individuals to be “captains of their own souls” (*ION*, 67). Fear, dread, and anxiety “eat into self-respect” (*ION*, 68) and individuals suffer from the loss of the “sense of wholeness” (*ION*, 72). In such an apathetic condition, they lose the capacity to “in-habit the world.”²¹ One can no longer trust his taste, nor feel that “he is original” (*CC*, 128). Dewey calls that a state of “moral subjection” (*CC*, 136), a loss of “mental freedom which is a condition of creation” (*CC*, 133).

Emerson and Dewey suggest that the disappearance of the gleam of light is the loss of a critical edge and a prophetic Whim — the sapping of the constructive energy for the regeneration of a democratic culture; and that it deprives us of our holistic sense of life and soul, and creates the spiritual void or deadness that we might experience in our everyday life. The gleam of light, by its disappearance, confronts us with the sense of disconnection not only from ourselves, but also from others. In its tragic aspect, its loss reminds us of our lost common nature.

Emerson’s voice still rings true even in contemporary politically and institutionally advanced states of democracy. In constitutionally guaranteed freedom, many of us are afflicted with a sense that we have lost “mental freedom”; it has become difficult to say, “I am” and “I think.” In the crisis of selfish individualism and nihilism in postmodern democratic societies, as Nietzsche warned in his Emersonian writing, a solitary individual living in “the inward cave” cannot find out how to “live outward,” while being “an indivisible, uncommunicating atom, an icy rock.”²² The imprisonment of the gleam of light is created not only by political or economic institutions; it is also reproduced and aggravated in our habits of mind and daily interpersonal relationships — even in education. Education often becomes a social conspiracy that can “slowly and surely choke” the initiative of the young and their fresh and prophetic whim (*CC*, 131). In the worst case, it might *kill* it.

The problems that Japanese education confronts today suggest this tragedy of the gleam of light. Though one of the world’s most advanced states of democracy, at the level of what Dewey calls “democracy as a personal way of life,” Japan still needs development.²³ The problems of the young, which have become increasingly serious in the past twenty years, illustrate this — school bullying, the psychological and physical ostracism of a single student by the group, truancy caused by a sense of isolation and lack of interest in learning, violence carried out by the young inside and outside the school. Further the fact that a high percentage of students returning

from abroad wish to go back to the foreign cultures they left, reported in *The New York Times*, indicates a certain exclusivity in the Japanese mind-set.²⁴ The racial tension in Japan is muffled and not as explicit as in multicultural America, though “globalization” is one of the key concepts in educational reforms. In their daily interactions, the minds of people and the social system are not yet sufficiently open to appreciate the potential contributions of marginalized people in culture. Those who deviate from the dominant social norms are more often than not forced to stifle their distinctive impulses and conform. In addition to these problems, Manabu Sato points out the phenomenon of the desire to “escape from learning,” a sense of nihilism and cynicism that haunts the minds of Japanese youngsters. Many children find no hope in what they learn, with a feeling that nothing makes a difference.²⁵ Nihilism among the young is a facet of selfish individualism in contemporary democracy, both in Japan and America.²⁶

These phenomena of the Japanese young are oftentimes dealt with sociologically (as social and institutional problems), on the one hand, and psychologically (as purely individual or personal problems), on the other. The following statement given by a fourteen-year-old Japanese boy, however, reminds us of the need for a mediating standpoint, the perspective of the gleam of light.

The present society does not easily accept my existence. Therefore, I throw my poetry to the society which rejects me. Looking around me, there is no place for me to be accepted. There is no one around me whom I can talk about the philosophical question, “Why do we live”?...The minds of friends at school are occupied with entrance exams into high schools and they cannot afford to talk about the concerns of the heart. In contemporary education, the emphasis is put more on clearing the goal of the entrance exam than discussing the issues of human dignity. They do not understand how important it is to think and discuss the problems of life.²⁷

Though being a thoroughly personal and private voice, this is the cry of a suppressed gleam of light that cannot find an entrance into his culture, a negative manifestation of his prophetic whim trapped in an icy cave. It is a voice of a young person who wants to grow, but does not know *how* in the current system of goal-oriented education. Simultaneously, it is a voice of *social* criticism issued from within personal suffering. The boy is isolated in frustration, but still yearns for connection, and therefore expresses his poetic words to unknown others. He does not require psychological counseling alone, but a *philosophical* dialogue to discuss the meaning of life.

In its negative, dark picture, this young boy reminds us of Emerson's voice: “the heart refuses to be imprisoned; in its first and narrowest pulses, it already tends outward with a vast force, and to immense and innumerable expansions” (C, 167). The boy suggests that there should be a way of education that can help us revive the almost extinguished gleam of light — a type of education that can respond to the spiritual crisis of the young, and that can awaken their prophetic whim and creative force. The boy also reminds us that a single gleam of light alone cannot grow, but needs others — an interpersonal philosophical conversation that can inwardly empower the young to battle outwardly against forces of duling convention.

In the general ethos of moral conservatism, the prophetic light of the young tends to be contained as being a threat to the conservation of culture. Moral

education, in the name of social control and discipline, tries to save the lost individual by imprisoning the prophetic whim within fixed boundaries. In the hectic acquisition of inert facts and reasoning skills, there is no space to appreciate the immediate sense of our being; our head, heart, and body are disjoined in education. Intelligence measured by objective scientific data and advanced technology makes us blind to the internal condition of the young — their “movements of the soul” (C, 174). Adults tend to lose trust in the promising bud of the youth’s impulse, and seclude themselves in the secure shelter of authoritative knowledge, forgetting to be surprised by the gift of life. Our closed mind blinds us to the precarious light of the silenced in culture — minor races, females, or dissidents. Such “education” numbs and enfeebles the gleam of light flickering at the edge of democratic society.

EDUCATION FOR THE GLEAM OF LIGHT

Education today will benefit by appreciating the wisdom of Emerson’s transcendentalism — not as mysticism, secluded spiritualism, or selfish individualism, but as a strong ethic of self-reliance: as a *social* morality for resisting the tragic loss of the gleam of light; and as philosophy for our democratic way of life.

The foremost task of Emersonian education is to acquire strong self-reliance in order to awaken the lost gleam of light, to become a “hero who is immovably centered.”²⁸ This centeredness is not a form of hedonism; instead, it aims for a thorough confrontation with one’s self to reclaim one’s natural proclivity. The fundamental ethical and philosophical question to be addressed is, “Where do we find ourselves?”²⁹ Emersonian education deeply cares for “privatest, secretest presentiment” (AS, 47), which requires a transcendental moment of “time above time.” At the same time, to fight against the tragedy of the gleam of light, it does not allow us to remain passive or secluded. Emerson inspires us to sharpen the critical edge in our heart as a seed of action, and to be engaged in philosophical thinking with the courage to say, “I think, I am,” in one’s authentic voice.

This is not, however, a mere call for strong individualism, or vengeful protest. Emerson’s transcendental perspective on the gleam of light lets us envision our “I” from the “third” standpoint: the “Over-Soul, within which every man’s particular being is contained and made one with all other.” In “the soul of the whole,” we transcend private interests (OS, 153). This is the condition of human perfection and fullest happiness. In its quest for “impersonality” (OS, 157), Emerson’s transcendentalism is universalist in its ethical standpoint. His commonness as an ideal state, however, originates in *nature*. His Over-Soul is a natural one.

In this dual structure, one central aim of education for the gleam of light is to overcome the apparently contradictory elements of human nature — an inclination towards strong self-centeredness and the aspiration towards the whole, beyond a narrow egocentrism. Emerson fully acknowledges this dilemma as “fate” — the natural law that “[w]e can only obey our own polarity.”³⁰ His “Over-Soul” is anything but a pre-existing metaphysical or immortal realm that guarantees peaceful harmony from the beginning; rather, it is the common, universal state that humans continuously struggle to build from within their fated partiality. This struggle is driven by a faith that “the inmost in due time becomes the outmost” (SR, 131) — as

the fourteen-year-old boy demonstrates who transcends his sorrow by his creative power, by thrusting his innermost poetic voice out into the public world that is yet to come.

As a clue to attaining such an ideal state, Emerson suggests the art of *detachment*. It is a mode of living in which: "I desire and look up and put myself in the attitude of reception, but from some alien energy the visions come" (*OS*, 210). Cavell says that "abandonment" or "forgetting ourselves" in the mode of reception is the essence of Emersonian thinking.³¹ The courage to detach oneself from one's previous state — even the sorrowful state of the gleam of light being extinguished — and to create a new path in expanding circles is the gist of Emerson's self-transcendence and human perfection. Then, as Nietzsche says with Emerson, the moment visits us with "bright sparks of the fire of love in whose light we cease to understand the word, 'I,' as something beyond our being."³² From this broader standpoint on life, care for one's self and others will become inseparable; we learn to *become* holistic. Emerson describes the art of detachment with the metaphor of riding horses:

One key, one solution to the mysteries of human condition, one solution to the old knots of fate, freedom, and foreknowledge exists, the propounding, namely, of the double consciousness. A man must ride alternately on the horses of his private and his public nature.³³

Emerson's transcendentalism offers a standpoint that encourages us to overcome, in our double consciousness, the fatal entanglement of individualization and socialization that is ever present on the path of human perfection. It opens a new vista beyond selfish individualism.

Emersonian education for the gleam of light, though addressing the moral dilemma of humans, is different from other types of moral education based upon virtue ethics or moral discipline. It primarily serves the gleam of light, a call from our wellspring of life, by opening our eyes imaginatively to the myth and wonder of the natural human soul. Instead of molding the life of children to general moral concepts and virtues, education for the gleam of light serves to awaken their spiritual freedom. By saving adults from the narrow cave of authoritarianism, and the young, from the hedonistic satisfaction of desire, Emersonian education aims to establish the fusion of freedom and control by nurturing constraints originated in each self. In its quasi-pragmatic spirit, it also aspires to mediate between grief in our irrecoverable past, a struggle for revival in the here and now, and a prophetic drive to become ourselves in the unknown future. Emersonian education contributes to a realm of spiritual transformation that cannot be fully measured by "objective" test scores. It opens our eyes to the invisibly flickering light that may be extinguished at any time. By broadening the narrow focus of education, Emerson's transcendentalism offers another "measure" for appreciating the meaning of holistic human growth.

1. The increasing interest in Nel Noddings's ethics of care today in both American and Japanese education illustrates this. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

2. Recently Japanese moral education has taken a conservative turn. For example, Yutaka Okihara criticizes liberal, progressive education for creating an “excessively tolerant society” and the moral decline of youth both in Japan and America. As its remedy, he claims a need for “moralism” in education to increase control. Yutaka Okihara, *New Education of the Heart* (Tokyo: Gakuyo Shobo, 1997), in Japanese.
3. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Richard Poirier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 101.
4. Russell B. Goodman, *American Philosophy and the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 44-45.
5. Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 51-79.
6. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Circles,” in Poirier, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 172. This text will be cited as *C* for all subsequent references.
7. John Dewey, “Emerson — The Philosopher of Democracy,” in *John Dewey: The Middle Works*, vol. 3, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1977), 188-90.
8. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in Poirier, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 131. This text will be cited as *SR* for all subsequent references.
9. Paul F. Boller, Jr. explains that New England Transcendentalism was influenced by Kant’s transcendental idealism, though it stresses the intuitive rather than the rational elements under the influence of Coleridge. Paul F. Boller, Jr., *American Transcendentalism, 1830-1860: An Intellectual Inquiry* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1974), 42, 45-46.
10. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1961), 173, 175.
11. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. and comm. Charles E. Butterworth (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1979), 68-70.
12. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Over-Soul,” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 163. This text will be cited as *OS* for all subsequent references.
13. Stanley Cavell, *Senses of Walden* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), 154.
14. John Dewey, “Construction and Criticism,” in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 5, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1977), 138. This text will be cited as *CC* for all subsequent references.
15. Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 23-24.
16. Cavell, *Senses of Walden*, 137, 156.
17. *Ibid.*, 129.
18. Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1989), 39.
19. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” in Poirier, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 40. This text will be cited as *AS* for all subsequent references.
20. John Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 5, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1977), 81. This text will be cited as *ION* for all subsequent references.
21. John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 10, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), 109.
22. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Schopenhauer as Educator,” in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazale, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 144.
23. John Dewey, “Creative Democracy — The Task before Us,” in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 15, Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), 228.
24. “Japan Unsettles Returnees, Who Yearn to Leave Again,” *New York Times*, 3 May 2000, International, A1, A12.
25. Manabu Sato, “Why Are Children Escaping from ‘Learning’? Cultural Crisis of Japanese Society Indicated by a ‘Decline of Knowledge Level,’” *The World* 56 (Tokyo: Iwanami, 2000), in Japanese.

26. René V. Arcilla and Tadashi Nishihira, "Nihilism and Education" (a symposium given at the University of Tokyo, 21 July 1999).
27. *Fourteen-Year-Olds: The Scenery in Their Heart*, ed. Japan Broadcasting Corporation (Tokyo: Japan Broadcasting Corporation, 1998), 45-6, original in Japanese with my translation.
28. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Considerations By the Way," in Poirer, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 396.
29. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," in Poirer, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 216. Cavell discusses the implications of this question. Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque, N. M.: Living Batch Press, 1989), 88-9.
30. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Fate," in Poirer, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 345.
31. Cavell, *Senses of Walden*, 136-38.
32. Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator," 161. George J. Stack points out that this essay of Nietzsche was written under the influence of Emerson. George J. Stack, *Nietzsche and Emerson: An Elective Affinity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992), 16-17; 105.
33. Emerson, "Fate," 365.