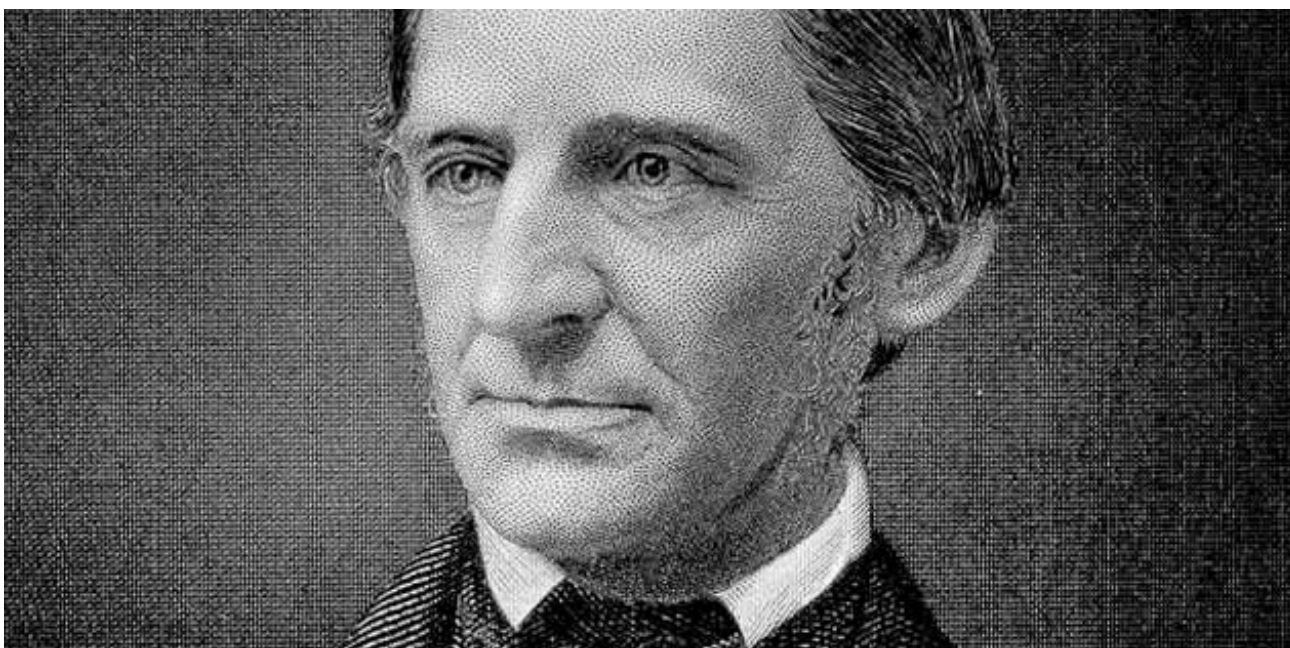


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FEATURE

Transcendental Liberty

The Emersonian ethic of self-reliance is evidence he was a libertarian

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"The less government we have, the better." So declared Ralph Waldo Emerson, a man not usually treated as a classical liberal. Yet this man—the Sage of Concord—held views that cannot be described as anything but classical liberal or libertarian.

None other than Cornel West, no friend of the free market, has said that "Emerson is neither a liberal nor a conservative and certainly not a socialist or even a civic republican. Rather he is a petit bourgeois libertarian, with at times anarchist tendencies and limited yet genuine democratic sentiments." An abundance of evidence supports this view. Emerson was, after all, the man who extolled the "infinite of the private man." One need only look at one of Emerson's most famous essays, "Self-Reliance," for evidence of his libertarianism.

"Self-Reliance" is perhaps the most exhilarating expression of individualism ever written, premised as it is on the idea that each of us possesses a degree of genius that can be realized through confidence, intuition, and nonconformity. "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men," Emerson proclaims, "that is genius."

Genius, then, is a belief in the awesome power of the human mind and in its ability to divine truths that, although comprehended differently by each individual, are common to everyone. Not all genius, on this view, is necessarily or universally right, since genius is, by definition, a belief only, not a definite reality. Yet it is a belief that leads individuals to "trust thyself" and thereby to realize their fullest potential and to energize their most creative faculties. Such self-realization has a spiritual component insofar as "nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind" and "no law can be sacred to me but that of my nature."

According to Emerson, genius precedes society and the State, which corrupt rather than clarify reasoning and which thwart rather than generate productivity. History shows that great minds have challenged the conventions and authority of society and the State and that "great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side." Accordingly, we ought to refuse to "capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions." We ought, that is, to be deliberate, nonconformist pursuers of truth rather than of mere apprehensions of truth prescribed for us by others. "Whoso would be a man," Emerson says, "must be a nonconformist."

Self-Interest and Conviction

For Emerson, as for Ayn Rand, rational agents act morally by pursuing their self-interests, including self-

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CURRENT ISSUE



January/February

Phil Bowermaster walks us through the vision of nanotech's founder, his disillusionment with the hype surrounding nanotech—and sketches in the myriad innovations that, hype aside, have brought us to the cusp of a revolution as far-reaching as the agricultural, industrial, and informational revolutions combined. Speaking of revolutions, Jeffrey Tucker reports back from the thriving, vital

interests in the well-being of family, friends, and neighbors, who are known and tangible companions rather than abstract political concepts. In Emerson's words, "The only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it." Or: "Few and mean as my gifts may be, I actually am, and do not need for my own assurance or the assurance of my fellows any secondary testimony."

It is not that self-assurance equates with rightness, or that stubbornness is a virtue; it is that confidence in what one knows and believes is a condition precedent to achieving one's goals. Failures are inevitable, as are setbacks; only by exerting one's will may one overcome the failures and setbacks that are needed to achieve success.

If, as Emerson suggests, a "man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition, as if everything were titular and ephemeral but he," how should he treat the poor? Emerson supplies this answer:

Do not tell me, as a good man did to-day, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they my poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent, I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong. There is a class of persons to whom by all spiritual affinity I am bought and sold; for them I will go to prison, if need be; but your miscellaneous popular charities; the education at college of fools; the building of meeting-houses to the vain end to which many now stand; alms to sots; and the thousandfold Relief Societies;—though I confess with shame I sometimes succumb and give the dollar, it is a wicked dollar which by and by I shall have the manhood to withhold.

These lines require qualification. Emerson is not damning philanthropy or charity categorically or unconditionally; after all, he will, he says, go to prison for certain individuals with whom he shares a special relationship. He is, instead, pointing out, with much exhibition, that one does not act morally simply by giving away money without conviction or to subsidize irresponsible, unsustainable, or exploitative business activities. It is not moral to give away a little money that you do not care to part with, or to fund an abstract cause when you lack knowledge of, and have no stake in, its outcome. Only when you give money to people or causes with which you are familiar, and with whom or which you have something at stake, is your gift meaningful; and it is never moral to give for show or merely to please society. To give morally, you must mean to give morally—and have something to lose.

Dissent

Emerson famously remarks that a "foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines." Much ink has been spilled to explain (or explain away) these lines. I take them to mean, in context, that although servile flattery and showy sycophancy may gain a person

Jerrey Tucker reports back from the thriving, vital front lines of culture--taking place, surprisingly, in century-old orchestra halls. Michael C. Munger offers libertarians a positive vision for society to replace the (perceived, at least) contrarianism some libertarians take as the end-all, be-all of the L-word. Everyone knows that the plague was brought to Europe by rats and spread because of changes in the climate; what they don't know, B.K. Marcus says, is the crucial role of power-hungry and tax-crazed rulers in making Europe's societies all the more vulnerable to collapse. L. J. Lane is back with another installment of his Of Mice and Mud comic, and much, much more.



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recognition and popularity, they will not make that person moral or great but, instead, weak and dependent. There is no goodness or greatness in a consistency imposed from the outside and against one's better judgment; many ideas and practices have been consistently bad and made worse by their very consistency. "With consistency," therefore, as Emerson warns, "a great soul has simply nothing to do."

Ludwig von Mises seems to have adopted the animating, affirming individualism of Emerson, and even, perhaps, Emerson's dictum of nonconformity. Troping Emerson, Mises remarks that "literature is not conformism, but dissent." "Those authors," he adds, "who merely repeat what everybody approves and wants to hear are of no importance. What counts alone is the innovator, the dissenter, the harbinger of things unheard of, the man who rejects the traditional standards and aims at substituting new values and ideas for old ones." This man does not mindlessly stand for society and the State and their compulsive institutions; he is "by necessity anti-authoritarian and anti-governmental, irreconcilably opposed to the immense majority of his contemporaries. He is precisely the author whose books the greater part of the public does not buy." He is, in short, an Emersonian, as Mises himself was.

The Marketplace of Ideas

To be truly Emersonian, you may not accept the endorsements and propositions in this article as unconditional truth, but must, instead, read Emerson and Mises and Rand for yourself to see whether their individualism is alike in its affirmation of human agency resulting from inspirational nonconformity. If you do so with an inquiring seriousness, while trusting the integrity of your own impressions, you will, I suspect, arrive at the same conclusion I have reached.

There is an understandable and powerful tendency among libertarians to consider themselves part of a unit, a movement, a party, or a coalition, and of course it is fine and necessary to celebrate the ways in which economic freedom facilitates cooperation and harmony among groups or communities; nevertheless, there is also a danger in shutting down debate and in eliminating competition among different ideas, which is to say, a danger in groupthink or compromise, in treating the market as an undifferentiated mass divorced from the innumerable transactions of voluntarily acting agents. There is, too, the tendency to become what Emerson called a "retained attorney" who is able to recite talking points and to argue predictable "airs of opinion" without engaging the opposition in a meaningful debate.

Emerson teaches not only to follow your convictions but to engage and interact with others, lest your convictions be kept to yourself and deprived of any utility. It is the free play of competing ideas that filters the good from the bad; your ideas aren't worth a lick until you've submitted them to the test of the marketplace.

THE ARENA



The Arena is a monthly debate feature designed to help readers explore issues of concern to classical liberals/libertarians.

This month, the issue is privilege. Cathy Reizenwitz argues that libertarians should be more concerned about issues of class and privilege, while Julie Borowski argues that libertarians should stay focused on individual rights.

What do you think? Read the arguments and vote for the best side!

"It is easy in the world," Emerson reminds us, "to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude." Let us stand together by standing alone.

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ABOUT

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Allen Mendenhall is a writer, attorney, and doctoral candidate in English at Auburn University. His forthcoming book is *Literature and Liberty: Essays in Libertarian Literary Criticism*. Visit his website at AllenMendenhall.com.

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