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The Problem of Anthropocentric Thinking in Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature*

INTRODUCTION

Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* extols the beauty, virtue, and usefulness of nature with regard to humanity's place in it. Emerson sees nature both as an extension of the cosmic spiritual entity he calls God and as the means for communing and uniting with that entity. Nature exists to be worshipped by humans, and humans exist to worship nature: for Emerson, this constitutes the universe's ultimate purpose, its "final cause." However, despite Emerson's beliefs about divine reverence for and moral enrichment through creation, *Nature* contains a line of reasoning that appears to undermine the notion that nature deserves humanity's utmost respect. This reasoning emerges as a byproduct of Emerson's distinct anthropocentric philosophy, and its reconciliation with the rest of Emerson's ideas presents readers with a challenge. This essay attempts to illuminate Emerson's anthropocentric worldview and demonstrate how it conflicts with *Nature*'s key themes. As we will soon see, a coherent philosophy cannot deify nature but at the same time deify, as Emerson does, humanity as distinctly separate from nature. Doing so creates a conflict that is not easily, if at all, reconcilable.

Before proceeding, it will be useful to define "anthropocentric" for readers unfamiliar with the term. According to Dictionary.com, "anthropocentric" has three different definitions: first, "regarding the human being as the central fact of the universe," second, "assuming human beings to be the final aim and end of the universe," and third, "viewing and interpreting

everything in terms of human experience and values” (*Dictionary.com*). While all three of these meanings, to an extent, accurately describe the variety of anthropocentrism Emerson demonstrates in *Nature*, the last one is the most precise. As will soon be shown, for Emerson, nature coheres and has value only through the lens of human affairs. Consequently, Emerson sometimes subordinates nature’s worth to the will of humankind.

HUMANS AS DISTINCT FROM NATURE

It appears that the reason Emerson avows the supremacy of human interests, values, and dignity is that he sees the human soul as fundamentally separate from nature. “Philosophically considered,” writes Emerson, “the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE” (7). So, while Emerson grants that physical human bodies are a part of nature, he holds that the souls they contain are not. It comes as no surprise, then, that Emerson refers to humans as “strangers in nature” and “aliens from God” (81).

In the section of *Nature* titled “Idealism,” Emerson endeavors to support his argument for the disconnection between man and nature, but his evidence, while attractive, is disappointingly weak:

Certain mechanical changes, a small alteration in our local position apprizes us of a dualism. ... The least change in our point of view, gives the whole world a pictorial air. [People] are unrealized at once, or, at least, wholly detached from all relation to the observer, and seen as apparent, not substantial beings. ... In these cases, by mechanical means, is suggested the difference between the observer and the spectacle,—between man and nature. (63-64)

The insight and originality of Emerson's observations here cannot be denied, and doubtless, many of us who have looked at the world from the perspective of a moving vehicle can relate to his description. But the logical procession from one of his ideas to the next—the procession being that, because we have a propensity for looking at the passing world as a spectacle, it follows that we are inherently, at the level of our souls, distinct from it—seems altogether too farfetched to carry any weight.

Agrarian author Wendell Berry, in an essay published in 1977 titled “The Body and the Earth,” points out one of the dangers of thinking in terms of the body-soul dichotomy to which Emerson subscribes:

By dividing body and soul, we divide both from all else. We thus condemn ourselves to a loneliness for which the only compensation is violence—against other creatures, against the earth, against ourselves. For no matter the distinctions we draw between body and soul, body and earth, ourselves and others—the connections, the dependences, the identities remain. (102)

Though in his writings Berry praises the beauty, order, and goodness of nature no less than does Emerson, he nevertheless differs with Emerson on this issue. For Berry, the denial of the link between body and soul forms the root of many problems. A failure to recognize the intrinsic link between them causes people to perceive themselves—as Emerson does—as “strangers in nature,” foreign beings not authentically at home in their environments. And without a sense of home, a sense of connection with nature, what is there to prevent people from doing violence to nature? Here, Berry criticizes the body-soul dichotomy because he believes it fosters a kind of harmful mentality toward nature that, as we will see presently, tends to characterize anthropocentric thought.

EMERSON'S ANTHROPOCENTRIC THINKING

At first, potentially harmful examples of anthropocentric thought in *Nature* may not readily appear evident. After all, Emerson spends a great deal of time waxing poetic about the beauty of nature, its synonymy with truth and virtue, and its redemptive spiritual power. Its spiritual dimension, particularly, Emerson lauds as invaluable; he writes that the “happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship” (77). In fact, worshipping nature for its divine perfection constitutes, for Emerson, the “final cause,” or the ultimate purpose, of humankind’s very existence. Emerson believes this, we know, not only because he says so, but also because *Nature* itself is structured such that the sections detailing the various uses of nature (“Commodity,” “Beauty,” “Language,” et cetera) are always hinting at the “final cause,” until we at last arrive at its description in the “Spirit” section. But if Emerson so thoroughly emphasizes the spiritual dimension of nature, where does his focus shift from nature to humans such that this spiritual dimension is undermined? And when his focus does shift, does the shift create any conflicts?

The first clear-cut example of this shift from nature-centered thinking to human-centered thinking—that is, the first clear-cut example of Emerson’s anthropocentric thinking—shows up as early as the second paragraph of *Nature*’s introduction. Emerson writes, “Undoubtedly we have no questions to ask which are unanswerable. We must trust the perfection of the creation so far, as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy” (6). It is important to pay attention to Emerson’s phraseology here: While the first sentence confidently asserts the unlimited power of human inquiry, it is tempered by the second, in which Emerson ascribes humankind’s potentially limitless knowledge to nature’s “perfection,” indicating a close relationship between them. But despite Emerson’s crediting

nature for providing humans with knowledge, his statement still carries the implication that humans do possess the capacity to fathom all of nature's mysteries.

Such presumptuousness seems out of step with a later passage in *Nature*, in which Emerson says, "We do not understand the notes of birds. The fox and the deer run away from us; the bear and tiger rend us. We do not know the uses of more than a few plants, as corn and the apple, the potato and the vine" (81). This passage, unlike the first, sounds like an authentic concession of nature's mystery. Its humility contrasts sharply with the other's boldness, and a disparity is thus evinced in Emerson's perception of nature: He seems, on the one hand, to revere nature's mysteries, but on the other to exalt humankind's boundless potential to master those mysteries. If we trace Emerson's logic to its inevitable conclusion, we must then ask what in nature will be left to revere when all its mysteries have been solved. Unfortunately, Emerson does not address this question.

A second contradiction stemming from an anthropocentric worldview appears in *Nature's* second chapter, "Commodity." Emerson explains how "All the parts [of nature] incessantly work into each other's hands for the profit of man," and how "the endless circulations of the divine charity nourish man" (16). For Emerson, nature is man's servant; one of its primary functions is to sustain man with its "rich conveniences." Toward the latter part of the chapter, Emerson paints for us a picture depicting some of the advantages that man has reaped from nature's provision:

He [man] no longer waits for favoring gales, but by means of steam, he realizes the fable of Æolus's bag, and carries the two and thirty winds in the boiler of his boat. To diminish friction, he paves the road with iron bars, and, mounting a coach with a ship-load of men, animals, and merchandise behind him, he darts through the country, from town to town, like an eagle or a swallow through the

air. By the aggregate of these aids, how is the face of the world changed, from the era of Noah to that of Napoleon! (17)

This passage is noticeably characterized by a great deal of pride in man's industrial accomplishments. Emerson's allusion to Æolus imbues the boiler engine with a kind of mythological significance, and his comparison of man to an eagle or swallow evokes a natural elegance and ease of mobility. But there is something dubious about his last exclamatory line. In it, Emerson acknowledges that man's enormous technological innovations have indeed altered the shape of the landscape, but—if we consider the context in which we find the sentence, as well as the general tone of the entire section—he seems to think that what he has acknowledged is something indisputably positive.

Today, we understand that this is not the case. Quite the contrary, we know that industrialization poses a great threat to the earth; it endangers many organisms, erodes precious topsoil, damages fragile but valuable ecosystems, eradicates forests, and pollutes the air and water. Emerson obviously does not advocate reckless destruction of the natural world; nevertheless, his unabashed celebration of man's industrial achievements and his admission that such achievements indeed affect “the face of the land” suggest that his trust in humankind may be both audacious and shortsighted.

A third example, this one almost overbearing, of a conflict engendered by Emerson's anthropocentric thinking exists in Chapter V, the chapter titled “Discipline”:

Nature is thoroughly mediate. It is made to serve. It receives the dominion of man as meekly as the ass on which the Saviour rode. It offers all its kingdoms to man as the raw material which he may mould into what is useful. ... More and more,

with every thought, does his kingdom stretch over things, until the world becomes, at last, only a realized will,—the double of the man. (50-51)

Here, using powerful religious imagery, Emerson gives us the single passage in *Nature* that perhaps reveals more about his anthropocentric philosophy than any other passage. Once again, he describes nature as subservient to human beings, and he is not at all subtle about doing so. By indirectly comparing humankind to Christ and nature to the donkey upon which Christ rode, Emerson solidly defines his position on the relationship between man and nature. As Emerson sees it, godlike humans exercise their “dominion” over the earth, expanding their “kingdom.” Meanwhile, servile nature, reduced to a “raw material,” bends and breaks to accommodate humanity’s royal will.

After such a forceful, almost arrogant declaration of humankind’s holy strength, a particular group of sentences near the end of the book appears bewilderingly contradictory. “[The world] differs from the body,” writes Emerson, “in one important respect. It is not ... now subjected to the human will. Its serene order is inviolable by us. It is therefore, to us, the present expositor of the divine mind” (80). When we compare these lines with those quoted above (the passage in which Emerson mentions *Æolus*), the notion of “human will” properly becomes the object of our attention. And it is precisely that, the notion of “human will,” which introduces the conflict: Emerson claims man can turn nature into “only a realized will,—the double of the man” (51), but then later claims nature “is not ... now subjected to the human will” (80). Clearly, these assertions clash with one another. The latter regards nature as a divine entity altogether immune to human influence, but the former treats it as a malleable material easily shaped by imposed human ingenuity. The undeniable tension between these two descriptions casts doubt on Emerson’s consistency.

Is Emerson aware, in *Nature*, of the friction created by the juxtaposition of these two perspectives? If so, he does not acknowledge his awareness, and, consequently, we as readers wind up somewhere in the middle, trying to choose between the two—between nature as a mysterious, spiritual entity worthy of worship and nature as a reservoir of raw materials, a submissive canvas for humankind’s industrial artistry. That Emerson’s attitude toward nature most of the time reflects humility and reverence means that the moments he appears to contradict that attitude stand out all the more.

CONCLUSION

It is worth considering how *Nature* might have been a different text if Emerson had perceived, as Wendell Berry does, an indissoluble *union* between body and soul instead of an incompatible disparity between the two. Because this duality resides at the heart of Emerson’s discourse in *Nature*, and because it is consistent with the anthropocentric fervor he occasionally adopts, it is likely that *Nature* would have been, at least philosophically, substantially different—although one doubts it would change much in the significance it places on revering and celebrating creation. If anything, the text might prove more consistent, devoid of serious incongruities like the belief that “we have no questions to ask which are unanswerable,” or the heralding of humankind’s industrial progress as wholly advantageous. Perhaps most importantly, a more consistent *Nature* would not speak of the physical world as “raw material,” humbly acceptant of “the dominion of man.” These discrepancies—while they by no means negate the text’s eminence—do indeed serve to illustrate the problem of anthropocentric thinking in a book that seeks to inspire reverence for nature.

Works Cited

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