

Ralph Waldo Emerson's Journey to Abolition

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Transcendentalism is considered the first distinct philosophy to come from the United States of America.¹ The philosophy and movement of Transcendentalism arose when America was still quite young, some 50 years after our independence in 1776. Transcendentalism was a product of what America, and its founders, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, were experiencing at the time. Certainly, one of the most defining things going on at that time in America was slavery. Accordingly, Emerson's unique theories relating to Transcendentalism were affected by slavery. He later applied his theories to the abolitionist movement and eventually became a prominent activist.

Transcendentalism was a progressive philosophical movement that helped influence many people to become more non-conformist. It contributed to various social reforms such as women's rights and eventually, abolition.² While Ralph Waldo Emerson and some of the main founders of Transcendentalism were inspired by philosophers from Europe and elsewhere, their theories of Transcendentalism and self-reliance were distinctly American.³

Transcendentalism became popular at an important time in early American history during the mid-1830's when America started to grow industrially and politically. After independence, American life was most advanced in the Northeast, the birthplace of Transcendentalism.⁴ Cities and the people inside of them started to define American politics and society. American politics and religion helped Americans, for better or worse, identify with communities and groups. The dominant religious movement in Boston at the time was Unitarianism. Unitarianism was a

¹ Kiger, Patrick J. "What Is Transcendentalism and How Did It Change America?," HowStuffWorks (HowStuffWorks, October 22, 2020), <https://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/Transcendentalism.htm>.

² Gura, Phillip F. "The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History Advanced Placement United States History Study Guide," Transcendentalism and Social Reform | AP US History Study Guide from The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, July 31, 2012), <https://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/Transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5>.

³ Kiger, "What Is Transcendentalism and How Did It Change America?," HowStuffWorks

⁴ Goodman, Russell, "Transcendentalism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.),

Christian sect that focused on rationality and intellectualism, with an emphasis on pure reason.⁵ However, there were Unitarians and others in Boston, most notably Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wanted to balance the Unitarism emphasis on reason with greater spirituality.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born in Boston in 1803. He would grow up there and later attended Harvard College. Early after college, he served as a minister for a Unitarian church in Boston. Soon thereafter, his first wife died at only 19, and he was grief-stricken. However, he did not find the consolation he needed in the Unitarian church.⁶ He wanted to discover God on his own rather than through institutions. So he quit after being a minister for a year, and he sailed to Europe to study more. It was after this trip that he began developing his philosophical views that helped create the framework for the philosophy of Transcendentalism.

Transcendentalism has been viewed as a reaction in part to the growth of industrialization and rationalism.⁷ Rationalism was a belief that people should base their opinions and actions on reason and knowledge rather than religion or emotion.⁸ On the other hand, Transcendentalism taught that “divinity pervades all nature and humanity.” Transcendentalists believed in the purity of individuals and viewed society and social institutions, to include religion and political parties, as corrupting influences on people who were fundamentally good.⁹ According to Emerson, governments suffer from the fundamental problem of corruption. “Every actual state is corrupt” Emerson said.¹⁰

⁵ “Transcendentalism (Article),” Khan Academy (Khan Academy), accessed March 28, 2021, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/the-early-republic/culture-and-reform/a/Transcendentalism>.

⁶ Goodman, Russell, "Ralph Waldo Emerson", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

⁷ Goodman, Russell, "Transcendentalism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.),

⁸ Blanshard, B.. "Rationalism." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 17, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/rationalism>.

⁹ “Transcendentalism (Article),” Khan Academy (Khan Academy)

¹⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson and David Robinson, *The Political Emerson: Essential Writings on Politics and Social Reform*(Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2004).

Emerson's theories of self-reliance were an important contribution to the guiding principles of Transcendentalism. Self-reliance challenges people to be non-conformists and to apply one's life experiences in interpreting and applying societal, religious, and political rules.¹¹ Emerson believed that society, governments, religions, and other institutions were sometimes mistaken with regard to individualism and individual rights. "Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity... [society] loves not realities and creators, but names and customs."¹² Here Emerson is saying that America wants its citizens to give up their individuality in order for society to provide for their well-being. Society, Emerson believed, wants conformists and common standards rather than unique and creative individuals.

In his essay *Politics*, Emerson further criticised the American government for being more concerned with property rights than people's rights, and, therefore was not a true democracy. His view that the Government favored protection of property, rather than protection of individual rights, was reflected at that time in how the American Government viewed slaves as property rather than individuals.

Despite Emerson's criticisms of government and society, he did not initially publicly protest against the laws and rules that supported slavery, and he was not known as an abolitionist. Early on, Emerson did provide limited support for the abolition movement and he was somewhat involved in anti-slavery activism. For example, he invited anti-slavery speakers to the church he worked in. However, it is notable that at first, he did not fully support the abolition movement.

¹¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance." Essay. In *Self-Reliance & Other Essays*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016.

¹² *ibid.*

Given that Emerson valued individual experiences over the rules imposed by institutions, governments, and society, it would seem inevitable that he would become an abolitionist eventually. However, Emerson was at first focused on his broader goal of every man being able to be a nonconformist. Despite his theories regarding self-reliance and individual freedom, he initially believed that abolition confined his work too much. He found activism for abolition quite literally “odious” and “hurtful.” Over time, however, Emerson came to realize that individualism was incompatible with slavery; both with regard to the slave and the master. “If you put a chain around the neck of a slave, the other end fastens itself around your own.”¹³

Slavery was so embedded in American politics that it even appeared in the Constitution in the Fugitive Slave Clause (Article IV, section 2), which specifically provided for the return of fugitive slaves. In addition, the U.S. Government enacted the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 which required that runaway slaves be returned to their owners, despite having escaped to a free state. This law also made the Federal Government responsible for capturing, returning, or trying runaway slaves. Emerson came to recognize he could not support these laws and to fully understood that slavery was an ill to humanity. His theory of self-reliance, which called for freedom of individuals to be non-conformists, needed a democratic form of government. Slaves in America however, did not live in a democracy, but rather a tyranny. As demonstrated by the fugitive slave laws, slaves in America were treated as property and not as individuals with freedom of choice.

Emerson saw the cruelty of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 fairly close at hand in the example of a federal court case in Boston involving Thomas Sims.¹⁴ Thomas Sims was an

¹³ Ralph Waldo Emerson and David Robinson, *The Political Emerson: Essential Writings on Politics and Social Reform*

¹⁴ Stefanie and Stefanie, “Emerson Argues for Civil Disobedience,” Weeds, March 9, 2008, <https://somanymanybooksblog.com/2008/03/09/emerson-argues-for-civil-disobedience/>.

escaped slave who had made it to Boston. With the new Fugitive Slave Law, instead of being freed, he was tried and sent back to Georgia, despite a petition from locals being shown to the court. Emerson spoke in a letter to a friend about his feelings toward the case saying “at this moment, in the cruelty and ignominy of the laws, and the shocking degradation of Massachusetts, I have no heart to look at books or to think of anything else than how to retrieve this crime. All sane persons are shattered by the treachery not only of the officials, but of the controlling public of the moment in Boston. It is one reason more to destroy all national pride, all reliance on others”¹⁵

As Emerson began to realize that supporting abolitionists was an important aspect of his work, he decided to become more public in his activism. This is seen in his increase in public speeches. His emphasis on individuality within his theory of self-reliance allowed for a person to evolve throughout their life, adapting to their situation. It’s through this fluidity that he became more of an abolitionist himself.

Emerson found the Fugitive Slave Law to be so terrible that he decided to deliver one of his first public speeches, “The Fugitive Slave Law” which gave voice to his discontent. He gave this lecture in Concord, MA, where many other northerners felt equally angered by the law. Within his lecture was another recurring theme: Emerson's deep anger toward Daniel Webster.

Daniel Webster was a Senator from Massachusetts who for a long time supported abolitionists. However, he shocked many progressive Northerners when he chose to support the Fugitive Slave Law. Webster's surprising support of this law was another reason why Emerson publicly spoke out against it. Emerson saw in Webster, a former like-minded man, a person who

¹⁵Gougeon, Leonard G. “Emerson and the Campaign of 1851” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 16, No 1 (January 1988).

had given in to his “powerful animal nature”¹⁶ Emerson viewed anyone who supported this horrible law a low beast. The fact that Webster, who once garnered Emerson’s respect, was now supporting such a terrible law, greatly angered Emerson and helped motivate him to speak out.¹⁷

Emerson and the transcendentalists felt that this animal nature in humans could be overcome and believed that individuals could transcend this primal instinct through the philosophy of Transcendentalism. The philosophy advocated for people to transcend the material world to find higher consciousness and individuality. This goal directly negates slavery, and is a key to why Emerson opposed Webster.

Emerson's theory of self-reliance encouraged growth as an individual and his increasing opposition to slavery eventually moved him to become a direct political campaigner. Emerson was tired of seeing public officials fail to do the right thing and help the people. He spoke of his intention to become more involved in politics in his journal saying the people of Massachusetts should be “informed of the baseness of their leaders” and “the last year has forced us all into politics, and made it a paramount duty to seek what is often a duty to shun.”¹⁸ Again, Emerson here points out that many political figures lack morals. He also commented on the increased harshness of slavery he was seeing in the Fugitive Slave Law and the cases enforcing it. He came to see that politics are forced upon every man, as it became a question of morals. Emerson's strong morals, and his own philosophical theories helped him realize he had to speak out and inspire for the better, and others took notice.

¹⁶ Johnson, Linck C. ““Liberty Is Never Cheap”: Emerson, “The Fugitive Slave Law,” and the Antislavery Lecture Series at the Broadway Tabernacle.”

¹⁷ Perhaps a factor in Emerson’s anger was that Emerson had to overcome his own racist thinking, while Webster failed to. For example, Emerson wrote in his journal in 1840: “It is plain that so inferior a race must perish shortly like the poor indians.” (Ralph Waldo Emerson. “Emerson’s Political Writings,” Edited by Kenneth Sacks. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018.) However while Webster changed his thinking about race for the worse, Emerson changed his thinking for the better.

¹⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson and David Robinson, *The Political Emerson: Essential Writings on Politics and Social Reform*

Charles Sumner, who had recently been elected Massachusetts Senator after Webster, and who ran on the anti-slavery platform, read Emerson's speeches on the Fugitive Slave Law and was impressed. He wrote to Emerson expressing his respect, and asked Emerson to aid John Palfrey in his campaign. Palfrey was looking to win a congressional seat by running on the free soil platform. The free soil platform wanted the Federal Government to denounce slavery, and advocated for general equal rights.¹⁹ These views were aligned with Emerson's opposition of slavery, and Palfrey and Emerson had been long time acquaintances, so it was understandable that Emerson agreed to help him.

Emerson went on to speak on behalf of Palfrey's campaign, echoing their similar views. Emerson gave his own lectures, including "The Fugitive Slave Law" to try to garner attention and support for Palfrey. This marks the height of Emerson's abolition career, and truly shows how he had changed his philosophy to allow him to become an abolitionist. In one of his earlier essays, *Politics*, Emerson said, "virtuous men will not rely on public agents."²⁰ Initially, Emerson's theory of self-reliance was too naive because he lacked experience. However, once he had matured and had seen the American Government not only fail to address slavery, but support it, he realized he needed to become more political in his philosophy. But Emerson also realized from experience that running for office wasn't for him, so he decided to support others with similar views.

One might argue that campaigning for another was not enough to be a true abolitionist.²¹ While Emerson did more than just support Palfrey's campaign, it is true that he never ran himself. However, his decision to participate in politics without becoming a politician is

¹⁹ Remanofsky, Sabine. "The Fear of Religious and Social Radicalism: The Princeton Critics' Reaction against Transcendentalism."

²⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson and David Robinson, *The Political Emerson: Essential Writings on Politics and Social Reform*

²¹ Grinspan, John. "Was Abolitionism a Failure?," *The New York Times*, February 1, 2015.

consistent with his own philosophy, which prioritized individualism and self-reliance. Emerson never felt truly that it was his duty to become a politician. Emerson wanted to inspire Americans to come to their own conclusions that slavery was wrong, in keeping with his theory of self-reliance. He believed that criticizing slavery and supporting politicians who opposed slavery was the best way to help individual Americans to decide that slavery was wrong. In changing aspects of his philosophy to become more involved in politics, deciding to speak out against slavery after initially not wanting to, and in actively supporting an anti-slavery politician, Emerson showed that he had completed his journey to abolition.

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