
THE ETHICAL DOMAINS OF INDIVIDUALISM:
NIETZSCHE AND EMERSON'S PEDAGOGIC VISION

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How to reconcile the needs of the individual with the needs of the community is an enduring problem in the field of educational philosophy.¹ John Dewey, for example, proclaimed the coordination between the individual and social factors as, “the ultimate problem of all education.”² When evaluating the dynamics of individualism versus the common good contemporary philosophers might turn to John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Amy Gutman, and others.³ Many have dismissed Ralph Waldo Emerson and Friedrich Nietzsche, regarding their focus on individualism as incompatible with democratic virtues and the common good. What contemporary philosophers overlook is how Emerson's educational ideas, further developed by Nietzsche, promote individualism as a social exercise easily provided by the public education system.

By exploring the pedagogical relationship promoted by Emerson and Nietzsche, I find balance between fostering individualism and promotion of the common good. Ignoring the pedagogic relationship in the promotion of individualism among these two authors neglects the strong ethical component, and the manner in which education is linked to individual development in relation to the common good. Examination of Emerson's influence on Nietzsche demonstrates how individualism was intended to be developed through a pedagogical relationship that would foster the ethical dimensions of how one should live in relation to society.

Emerson was a direct influence on the early work of Nietzsche who said of Emerson's writing, he had never “felt so much at home in a book.”⁴ In *Schopenhauer as Educator*, Nietzsche explicitly refers to Schopenhauer as a teacher and mentor, however, the essay is sprinkled with references to

¹ Mark E. Jonas, “Educating the Self and Others: Nietzsche's Education for the Common Good” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, New College, Oxford, March/April 2012), 1, <https://www.philosophy-of-education.org/uploads/papers2012/Jonas.pdf>.

² John Dewey, “Plan of Organization of the University Primary School,” in *The Early Works of John Dewey*, ed. Jo Ann Boyston, vol. 5, 1882–1898 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 224.

³ Jonas, “Educating the Self,” 1.

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), 12.

Emerson.⁵ Nietzsche praised Emerson in his journals and letters, in *Twilight of the Idols*, and his early philosophical essays.⁶ In 1888 Nietzsche described his reading of Emerson as “a unique case,” as there was no author Nietzsche read or respected more than Emerson.⁷

Individualism, experience, and the self are complex themes in Emerson and Nietzsche. The intricacies of these themes are compounded by the specific complexities of culture and history. Emerson revealed to Nietzsche that self-formation through education is the driving force of ethical development and contributes to the common good. By exploring the educational systems they faced one can see how both cultivate educational philosophies based on non-conformity, self-formation, and a strong pedagogic relationship.

EDUCATION: INDIVIDUAL TALENT AND THE COMMON GOOD

Emerson commonly addressed education and self-formation in individual terms; however, he also wrote of public education as a collective responsibility:

I praise New England because it is the country in the world where is the freest expenditure for education. We have already taken, at the planting of the Colonies (for aught I know for the first time in the world), the initial step, which for its importance might have been resisted as the most radical of revolutions, thus deciding at the start the destiny of this country—this, namely, that the poor man, whom the law does not allow to take an ear of corn when starving, nor a pair of shoes for his freezing feet, is allowed to put his hand into the pocket of the rich. . . . The child shall be taken up by the State, and taught, at the public cost, the rudiments of knowledge, and, at last, the ripest results of art and science.⁸

Emerson was writing in support of the common school movement in New England. He advocates for a public education system to serve individuals in all classes and from all backgrounds. History, for Emerson, was the catalyst for this evaluation and the educator necessary to evoke in one’s self a creative mode for overcoming traditional binds of our existing society. Emerson had stated that the interest of history lies in the fortunes of the poor. He links state-

⁵ Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2004), 211–18.

⁶ George J. Stack, *Nietzsche and Emerson: An Elective Affinity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992).

⁷ Benedetta Zavatta, “Historical Sense as Vice and Virtue in Nietzsche’s Reading of Emerson,” *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 44, no. 3 (2013): 1.

⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Education,” in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 10, *Lectures and Biographical Sketches* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), 125.

funded education to the destiny of the country. The function of a tax-supported system of public education was, for Emerson, a way to provide a liberal education for social advancement.

Nietzsche, who unlike Emerson was writing in response to an established system of compulsory universal education, offers a very different perspective on public education. In other words, while Emerson wrote to advocate for schools before a system of public education was fully established, Nietzsche was critiquing a system of education already in place. He declared,

What is called the “education of the masses” cannot be accomplished except with difficulty; and even if a system of universal compulsory education be applied, they can only be reached outwardly: the individual lower levels where, generally speaking, the masses come into contact with culture, where the people nourishes its religious instinct, where it poetizes its mythological images, where it keeps up its faith in its customs, privileges, native soil, and language—all these levels can be scarcely be reached by direct means, and in any case only by violent demolition.⁹

Nietzsche was skeptical of the potential for public education to foster social evolution. He warned of the possibility of schools to function as a system of social control. He was skeptical of the capacity for public education to help individuals evolve beyond the bounds of traditional cultural norms. Nonetheless, he highlighted the necessity of “disciplined schooling” in his educational theory.¹⁰ Nietzsche claimed that few individuals possess the toughness to cultivate their talents therefore education must form this toughness in them.¹¹

Education is not simply considered preparation for life, but is emphasized by Emerson as an essential aspect of the art of living. In *An Address*, he declared,

The great object of Education should be commensurate with the object of life. It should be a moral one; to teach self-trust; to inspire the youthful man with an interest in himself; with a curiosity touching his own nature; to acquaint him with the resources of his mind, and to teach him that there is all his

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Complete Works*, vol. 6, *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions; Homer and Classical Philology*, trans. J. M. Kennedy (Edinburgh: T.N. Foulis, 1909), 75.

¹⁰ Avi Mintz, “The Disciplined Schooling of the Free Spirit: Educational Theory in Nietzsche’s Middle Period,” *Philosophy of Education 2004*, ed. Chris Higgins (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2004), 163.

¹¹ Jonas, “Educating the Self,” 8.

strength, and to inflame him with a piety towards the Grand Mind in which he lives.¹²

Emerson did not advocate education for individualistic pursuits, rather the aim is social and oriented toward justice and love. The teacher should not attempt to predict the natural capacities of the student, but should seek to introduce the student to their internal power. Students must be cognizant of social conditions and the ability that resides within them.

Education, for Emerson, is a process of living and must represent real-life, which is communal and socially based; thus, it should grow from that with which the child is already familiar. In Emerson's essay "Fate," he notes that education is linked to the practical question of how we conduct our life. He asks, *how shall I live?*¹³ He advocates for a public school system so that all individuals have the ability to nurture their innate abilities, form their true selves, learn to stand in opposition to conformity, and find teachers that will foster self-direction. Emerson believed that education is a process of growth directed by the individual. The individual possesses the raw material for growth, however the pedagogic relationship is indispensable for development. Human beings possess innate possibilities and properties for growth. However, exemplars are necessary for continual growth.

Some scholars suggest that Nietzsche is unclear regarding the capacity of all individuals to possess the intellectual curiosity to evolve past traditional ways of knowing, what he termed "self-overcoming."¹⁴ Nietzsche, however, promoted education for all, believing everyone should have an opportunity to develop their potential and receive a quality education.¹⁵ Those who attempt self-overcoming need to pursue an education characterized by the formation of individual autonomy. This autonomy is not possible for most youngsters of school age; therefore, the best that schools can do is to develop an individual's basis for knowledge, in the most rigorous way possible. Taking inspiration from Emerson's focus on the student's natural ability, Nietzsche calls for schools to develop each individual's potential. In *Human, All Too Human* he writes,

Do not talk about giftedness, inborn talents! One can name great men of all kinds who were very little gifted. They

¹² Ralph Waldo Emerson, "An Address Delivered at Providence, Rhode Island, on the Occasion of the Opening of the Greene Street School (10 June 1837)," in *The Selected Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ronald A. Bosco (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 48.

¹³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Fate," in *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), 366.

¹⁴ See Richard Schacht, *Making Sense of Nietzsche: Reflections Timely and Untimely* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995) and *Nietzsche* (New York: Routledge, 1983).

¹⁵ Jonas, "Educating the Self," 9.

acquired greatness, became “geniuses” (as we put it), through qualities the lack of which no one who knew what they were would boast of: they all possessed that seriousness of the efficient workman which first learns to construct the parts properly before it ventures to fashion a great whole.¹⁶

Nietzsche acknowledges the need for a strong educational base before anyone can evolve new and higher pathways of thinking.

Emerson links this necessary base experience to social reform, and he thought of school as the essential institution of social reform. School is meant to be a social institution, which needs to be organized as a society; thus, learning is a byproduct of social interaction. This means that schooling is to be aligned with the real-life occupational and democratic experiences of the surrounding society.

Nietzsche believed that education should produce good citizens who serve society.¹⁷ However, this service to society was not meant to develop individuals for the sake of others. Education should be opposed to making individuals subordinate to custom. Nietzsche believed that every culture needs individuals who consciously reinvent its values. Certain values exist within the nexus of social relations, thereby becoming normative and infused in social policy, in the form of institutions and bureaucracy. He believed that education was needed to overcome the constraints of outdated value systems.

Like Emerson, Nietzsche viewed schools as necessary institutions for society, but he focused most on the pedagogic relationship between educators and students. He proclaimed, “Your true educators and formative teachers reveal to you what the real raw material of your being is, something quite ineducable, yet in any case accessible only with difficulty, bound, paralyzed: your educators can be only your liberators.”¹⁸ This quote resonates with Emerson’s belief that educators should inspire students to develop an unbounded inner nature. Growing from Emerson’s influence, Nietzsche’s beliefs about education further elaborate on the distinction and complexities between a state system of education, cultivating a student’s natural ability, teaching context over conformity, and emphasizing the relationship between teacher and student.

NON-CONFORMITY: SELF-FORMATION FOR SOCIAL EVOLUTION

The pedagogic transmission of knowledge has remained central to formal systems of meaning in Western culture since antiquity. For Emerson,

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 163.

¹⁷ Mintz, “Disciplined Schooling,” 163–64.

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, trans. James W. Hillesheim and Malcolm R. Simpson (South Bend, IN: Regenery/Gateway, 1965), 5–6.

the pupil needed to discover “his own secret.”¹⁹ The teacher is a necessary guiding force in this discovery. Conformity, for Emerson, was the chief vice. Some consider the individualism of Emerson to be anti-egalitarian and undemocratic.²⁰ However, the pedagogic relationship and process of self-formulation has the power to nudge the individual toward social evolution. As Nietzsche’s educational philosophy highlights, individuals serve society best when they learn self-trust, evaluate their contemporary morals, and envision a new world.

Nietzsche makes a distinction between morality based on custom and morality based on personal introspection and contemplation. He preferred the latter believing that it was beneficial for humanity. Society is benefited when individuals seek their own personal happiness and wellbeing. Likewise for Nietzsche, the health of the individual is connected to the health of the community. To fully develop the self is the only way to help others.

Consistent with this, individual consciousness is linked to an inner voice that supersedes social forms of learning. For Emerson, the role of education is to foster trust in this inner voice. He wrote,

There is a time in every man’s education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better for worse as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried.²¹

Individuals must remain apprehensive of external forms of knowledge, and seek access to knowledge from within. An individual will never find his potential until he is capable of self-derived thoughts. He regarded the self as a type of sanctuary or protector of individuality, upon which a reflexivity of between knowledge and experience is necessary for self-formation.

Like Emerson, Nietzsche believed that individuals must remain apprehensive of external forms of knowledge, and seek knowledge from within. For Nietzsche, education is connected to the theme of liberation. For Nietzsche the outcome of the pedagogic relationship was self-overcoming, and liberation. He defined liberation in *Schopenhauer as Educator* as

¹⁹ Emerson, “Education,” 143.

²⁰ John Rawls, for example, criticizes Nietzschean perfectionism as incompatible with democratic society. Judith Shklar argues that Emerson’s valorization of great men contradicts his fondness for democracy. For more see: Michael Lopez, ed., *Emerson/Nietzsche* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1998), 5–8.

²¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), 114.

the clearing away of all weeds, debris, vermin—that want to infringe upon the tender buds of the plant—an effusion of light and warmth, the gentle, quiet rustling of nocturnal rain, it is imitation and worship of nature, where nature is disposed to being motherly and merciful, it is the perfecting of nature when it prevents her cruel and merciless attacks and turns them to good, when it draws a veil over the expressions of nature’s stepmotherly disposition and her sad lack of understanding.²²

For Nietzsche introspection and self-trust are used to derive truth, and truth is a process-oriented objective, as opposed to a finite or fixed ideal. The examination of culture and social morality should not stem from customs, culture, or habit. There are not forms of knowledge or values, which are unconditionally valid.

For Emerson the aim of education is to surpass the binds of tradition and existing culture, in the form of laws, institutions, and convention. For Emerson, education is not simply a role or obligation of the state, but the essence of a progressive society. Society threatens individualism, and yet organized education is essential in empowering individual development. His notion of social evolution was connected in a very pragmatic manner to education reform. For Emerson, education is action oriented, and requires being a “nonconformist.” Individuals are called not just to see the world as it is, but to envision a new world.

In his essay, *Education*, he wrote to teachers, “You have made your school-room like the world. Of course you will insist on modesty in the children, and respect to their teachers, but if the boy stops you in your speech, cries out that you are wrong and sets you right, hug him!”²³ For Emerson individualism and self-reliance are virtues that stand in opposition to conformity.

For Nietzsche, individuals should undergo processes necessary for the development of a perspective that allows one to surpass the moralists of the past. The following passage illustrates Nietzsche’s distinction between memories and the practical process of cultivation through education:

Let the youthful soul look back on life with the question: what have you truly loved up to now, what has elevated your soul, what has mastered it and at the same time delighted it? Place these venerated objects before you in a row, and perhaps they will yield for you, through their nature and their sequence, a law, the fundamental law of your true self.

²² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.

²³ Emerson, “Education,” 126.

Compare these objects, see how one complements, expands, surpasses, transfigures another, how they form a stepladder upon which you have climbed up to yourself as you are now.²⁴

For Nietzsche, the individual's relation to self is part of a historically identifiable system of beliefs that lay outside the confines of established knowledge. In this sense, Nietzsche has a pedagogical method that is characterized by the rejection of conformity and the necessity of overcoming the boundaries of existing systems of thought. He is not anti-egalitarian but rather, espouses a rejection of normative principles in understanding the nature of individual beings.

While morality, for Nietzsche, may arise from an internal drive, or disposition, or act as a *self*-maintaining process, it is less defined in terms of a biological mechanism as much as from social norms and the historical residue of religion and the aristocracy. The drive of morality is neither essential nor specific to all human life. If herd mentality is bred into certain types and aristocratic morality into others, there is not a universal derivative for morality.

SELF-FORMATION: OVERCOMING SOCIAL CONSTRAINT TO DEVELOP INDIVIDUAL VALUES

In sections of Nietzsche's work, he seems to promote biological determinism. In the context of education, however, it's clear that he believed in the cultivation of talent. Education can draw out a person's potential, but does not instill talents and capacities. The formation of inner talent will only occur through a process. Nietzsche is intent on provoking his readers to undertake this process. Furthermore, although there is a degree of naturalism in Nietzsche's work that emphasizes the role of nature, and examination of human conditions in relation to nature, biology, and internal drives, the manner in which 'man' is translated into *nature* presents a complex state of affairs. Consider Nietzsche's commentary on the Stoics relation to nature,

Living—is that not precisely wanting to be other than this nature? Is not living—estimating, preferring, being unjust, being limited, wanting to be different? And supposing your imperative 'live according to nature' meant at bottom as much as 'live according to life'—how could you not do that? Why make a principle of what you yourselves are and must be? In truth, the matter is altogether different: while you pretend rapturously to read the cannon of your law in nature, you want something opposite . . . Your pride wants to impose your morality, your ideal, on nature—even on nature and

²⁴ Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, 5–6.

incorporate them in her; you demand that she should be nature.²⁵

For Nietzsche our understanding of nature is shaped through history and culture. Our understanding of nature is also mediated by our social position. Nature and internal drives are powerful, but this does not mean that Nietzsche rejects the significance of overcoming the conventions of naturalism. He suggests that individuals have a level of control over the latter through self-reflection.

At the heart of knowledge, for Nietzsche, is cultivation of the self through self-overcoming, which stems from an understanding of one's historical lineage. A person must understand tradition and ways of knowing, in order to evolve. We must discipline ourselves to master these traditions, reevaluate them and eventually evolve beyond them to recreate society. Since knowledge is embedded in individual perspective, meanings are neither true nor false beyond the individual adopting them.

This includes the connection between internal beliefs, external reality, and individuality. Within his philosophical examination of education, Emerson incorporated a pedagogy that mediates between knowledge and a realm of consciousness that is often blurred by a distorted reality. There is a form of understanding that comes from the pedagogic function. But this function also positions the individual self as central to understanding and meaning formation.

For Nietzsche, self-formulation is situated between social critique and a process of self-overcoming. The influence of society precedes the conditions necessary for self-formulation. One must risk one's self to become more in line with one's true nature. Individuals do not act consistently according to reason, but develop much of their understanding through tradition and/or emotion. In this way, Nietzsche sought an evaluative approach for understanding human beings as creatures of their environment and creators of values. Individuals, according to Nietzsche, should cultivate this perspective as a foundation for the creation of new values, knowledge, and meanings. Thus, one begins one's education by understanding the cultural context in which one lives.

Although Nietzsche does not formulate a notion of the transcendental, he nonetheless posits the goal of transformation and self-overcoming. He describes this process as one by which a person transcends a system-of-beliefs or state-of-affairs that formerly defined their sense or conception of self. For Nietzsche, skepticism creates a conflict of internal contradiction, in the sense that it creates a negation of consciousness and inability to achieve self-actualization. It is both pedagogical and psychological in the sense that its function is to modify the mode of being within the self, and how the subject relates to himself. Self-reliance and individualism are pedagogic and not about isolation.

²⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (1966; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 15.

For Emerson, education is filtered through the individual's relation to nature and society. In terms of mediation between external and internal factors, there lies a primary difference in the role and position of both the individual and the *true man*. Namely, in Emerson the *genius figure* is in a position to elevate consciousness and to lead the individual toward education. For Nietzsche individuals must overcome the binds of culture to achieve the active and creative forces achieved by the *true man*. This stems from the fact that traditional education produces an internal conflict inscribed in memory and dictating a sense of being. The process or psychological state for education is related to modes of internalization. Furthermore, it involves a type of internalization that, while psychological in nature, is shaped by social dynamics.

Individualism for Emerson is not about isolation, but rather is guided through a pedagogic relationship, in which the genius figure that speaks to the student inspires the student. Emerson references this type of person as the figure of a genius. He equated genius with the capacity for self-derived thinking and self-trust in the expression of one's own ideas. In his essay "Self-Reliance," Emerson wrote, "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, —that is genius."²⁶

THE PEDAGOGIC RELATIONSHIP: TO INSPIRE SELF TRUST

For both Emerson and Nietzsche the relationship between teacher or master and student is not pedagogical in a traditional or common manner where a teacher or master is to endow the student with capabilities, aptitudes, and knowledge. Often critiqued as anti-egalitarian, this sentiment needs to be understood as a pedagogic relationship in which individuals are spurred to emulate, as opposed to imitate, the characteristics of the type of person who evokes within one's self a creative mode for self-overcoming. Emerson wanted teachers to foster self-trust in students. Nietzsche believed the pedagogic relationship helped to compensate for the failure of the herd to act or motivate change.

Emerson recognized that schools and colleges were important social institutions, but he focused his educational philosophy around the manner in which teachers could inspire self-trust and foster individual thought. His views on education call for a better understanding of his overarching philosophical beliefs about individualism and self-formation. Emerson stated,

Respect the child. Be not too much his parent. Trespass not on his solitude. But I hear the outcry which replies to this suggestion: Would you verily throw up the reins of public and private discipline; would you leave the young child to the mad career of his own passions and whimsies, and call this anarchy a respect for the child's nature? I answer, – Respect

²⁶ Emerson, "Self-Reliance," 113.

the child, respect him to the end, but also respect yourself. . . . The two points in a boy's training are, to keep his nature and train off all but that; to keep his nature, but stop off his uproar, fooling, and horseplay; keep his nature and arm it with knowledge in the very direction in which it points.²⁷

Emerson emphasized the need for teachers to foster student self-direction. Education is the means through which to introduce children to their social surroundings and, hence, to change them. Education is to prepare students for the future, but a future that is unpredictable. It means the role of the educator is to give the student command of himself or herself, in addition to his or her powers.

This capacity, however, can only be developed through a pedagogic relation with a teacher who fosters self-trust. For Nietzsche, it is up to the pupils to determine if the educator speaks to them and to discover for themselves the basis of their talents. Nietzsche's affection for Emerson speaks to his appreciation for an ethical commitment to social welfare. As with Emerson, Nietzsche believed people become their higher selves through exemplars. Nietzsche used the figure of the "true man" as such an exemplar.²⁸

For Nietzsche, those who became geniuses developed this genius through their relationship with an exemplar. Nietzsche believed, for example, that godly exemplars played this role for the Greeks.²⁹ However, it is clear that exemplars need not be divinely superior—they may have much in common with the people they inspire. Nietzsche was clear that exemplars have cultivated their talents.³⁰ Therefore, the role of the exemplar was to foster a type of optimism. Education could develop strength of character necessary to overcome self-doubt and maximize talents.³¹ In this cycle of character formation, promoted through exemplars, recognizing or creating new exemplars is essential for social evolution.

CONCLUSION

Both Emerson and Nietzsche provide valuable insight when contemplating individualism in relation to social evolution. Considering the impact Emerson had on Nietzsche, contemporary educators can see how he built on Emerson's philosophical insights. Complicating notions of Emerson and Nietzsche as anti-egalitarian and elitist, in-depth analysis shows they both supported the need for a strong education system based on non-conformity encouraging evolution of morals and thought, self-formation as a social exercise, and the pedagogic relationship as emulation not imitation.

²⁷ Emerson, "Education," 143.

²⁸ Jonas, "Educating the Self," 7.

²⁹ Nietzsche, *All Too Human*, 114.

³⁰ Jonas, "Educating the Self," 7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 8.
