

RESEARCH ARTICLE



RALPH WALDO EMERSON'S PHILOSOPHY OF INDIVIDUALISM: AN INSPIRATION

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ABSTRACT

Full of optimism and idealism, Emerson's essays make wonderful companions through the trails of life, providing a feast of inspiration and insight. Reading Emerson is like taking a potent elixir that refreshes the soul, restores, hope and inspire faith. (Whelan16)

Ralph Waldo Emerson's philosophy of individualism was an inspirational manifesto for the American people to redefine their destiny to change the course of American history in the history of the world. The paper delineates exclusively on the essays of *Self – Reliance* and *Over-Soul* to figure out its influences of the philosophy of individualism on the human nature. Ralph Waldo Emerson's individuality shines in his original thoughts and his ambitious efforts to reach to the people, to share his acumen on human philosophy to inspire the mankind. Emerson concluded his essay on *Self-Reliance* to illuminates the radiance of trust in the self "Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principle." *Self-Reliance* (Turnip 116)

Keywords: Individualism, Over Soul, Self Reliance, Inspiration

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INTRODUCTION

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born in Boston and known as 'Sage of Concord' carried the potential ideas to change the mind and the soul of the individuals so as to place the prominence of self in the universe. The paper proposes to highlight the inspirational thoughts from his collection of critical essays on the concept of self and the reliance on the self to face the challenges of life with courage and determination. His *Essays of First Series* was republished in 1847 and in these series he wrote on insightful topics of History, Self-Reliance, Spiritual Laws, Love, Friendship, Prudence, Heroism, Over-Soul, Circles, Intellect and Art. The term Philosophy can be understood as study of knowledge to find the meaning

in life and for Emerson meaning in life means belief in self, a guiding force for individualism herein also resides the soul.

To understand his essays one has to study other related concepts to grasp the gist about the origin of his philosophy. For instance, Emerson's essays on *Nature* (1836) describes the relationship of nature with humans in relevance to commodity, beauty, language, discipline, idealism, spirit and prospects as different forms of nature. In 1837 he delivered a speech before Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard *The American Scholar* later called as 'American Literary Declaration of Independence'. In this way his writing and speaking greatly influenced the people and to ponder over his views on the Self

and Soul itself enriches the spirit to dwell deeper into the meaning of mind, soul, body and life. The union of the philosophical features of self, nature and soul was well depicted in *The New Age Movement and the Biblical World View*:

Individual effort in self-actualization, intuition, and imagination all became qualities of life designed to pierce the restricting shell of the human body and usher the initiate into direct contact with the Over-Soul. (Newport 25)

The self and the soul are inseparable in individuals and if lost in adversity and misfortune, for its reunification Emerson insists to practice self-reliance in order to refuse conformities to external forces (Society, Religion, other than the Self). Emerson in this way unites the nature in self and soul as an integral part of individuality to search the truth, implicitly mentioned in his essay *Over-Soul* he says, "We know truth when we see it, from opinion, as we know when we are awake." (Whelan 25) Emerson believes in human tendency to seek truth and this knowledge of new truth he calls it as revelation. The self of an individual recognizes the soul's revelation as it (truth) firmly urges to affirm for self-reliance as the soul is the only receiver and perceiver of the new revelation. Through his philosophy he mentions the presence of God within the individuals in the form of soul; as the nature of the soul embedded in the unconscious self that subtly directs the mind therefore to rely on one's own mind means self-reliance.

Emerson affirmed to have more faith in self-reliance he cautioned against the blind faith in God, even the almighty comes into existence only in the form of the act, so act to obey the God, and he says so in his essay, "As soon as the man is at one with God, he will not beg. He will then see prayer in all action." *Self-Reliance* (Turnip106) Emerson says each individual has a soul but *Over-Soul* is higher self that unities all individuals souls as universe souls, in this way for Emerson *Over-Soul* invisibly visible. Emerson says soul lives in physical body and *Over-Soul* is beyond the life cycle. This precise clarity of the role of the soul (unconscious) in the self (conscious) explores the

individual's efforts for the acquisition of self-reliance to retain the individualism. In this context, quoting the lines from *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson* by Porte and Morris further enumerates the concept of Self-Reliance.

Self-Reliance is nothing other than an operative belief that the self has an innate capacity in the direction of truth, couple with the courage to explore it, even at the cost of appearing ridiculous to the neighbors. (Porte 109)

Emerson's speeches and essays urges the individuals to place their trust in the self for the sake of originality, breaking away from past prejudices to refuse submissions to the false perceptions of the world around them instead to follow their own path, to trust thyself.

What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. *Self-Reliance* (Turnip, 86)

He was a great orator and his ideas infused enthusiasm that inspired the people and the nation, he said, "They who made England, Italy, or Greece venerable in the imagination did so by sticking fast where they were, like an axis of the earth." *Self-Reliance* (Turnip 109) His thoughts energizes the individuals to rely on one's self with firm convictions in one's beliefs to do and act differently infuses spirit of courage to take risks to face new challenges unafraid of new consequence to write a novel history. To inspire the people, Emerson says; to be understood is great but to be misunderstood is the greatest of all understanding thus have courage to express your opinion fearlessly to unfetter from confirmations to dare to be different in the different world.

Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speaks what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradicts everything you said to-day.—"Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood."—Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and

Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood. *Self-Reliance* (Turnip 90)

He stated that to acquire individuality one must strongly refuse conformity and consistency in order to listen to the inner voice to live a truthful life. This truth is trust in self, a source of strength for individuals to define their destiny. Emerson emphasized on the truth in self and soul for strong individuality in his essay *Over-Soul* "For the soul is true to itself, and the man in whom it is shed abroad cannot wander from the present, which is infinite, to a future which would be finite". (*Over-Soul*) The close reading of his philosophy of individualism inspires the individuals to live in the truth (soul) and in the indefatigable trust in the self. Emerson insisted that individuals must value their own worth, "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." *Self - Reliance* (Turnip 80) An individual's actions speak its truth and truth speaks in actions so the discovery of truth always present in the future, not in the consistent conformity for the past. Ralph Waldo Emerson's philosophy of individualism was an inspiration for the people to live in self-belief, to have self-trust, to value self-worth and to evolve in self-reliance for the emergence of strong individuals capable to build strong nations to change the course of real history.

I must be myself. I cannot break myself any longer for you, or you. If you can love me for what I am, we shall be the happier. If you cannot, I will still seek to deserve that you should. *Self - Reliance* (Turnip 103)

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