Individualism and the Christian Call: Catholic Theology of Vocation in an Emersonian Key

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Bradley Remington Myers

Abstract

Might we hope for a form of individualism that is at once vocational and Catholic? This dissertation answers in the affirmative. In the course of doing so, it enlists the services of one of individualism's great champions, Ralph Waldo Emerson, for Catholics an unlikely ally, to be sure, but one whom Catholics, by the end of this rapprochement, will come to appreciate as a kindred spirit. The species of individualism associated with the name of Emerson resonates with themes sounded by the Church through the Second Vatican Council and in magisterial documents since. These themes invite us to consider the conditions of possibility for a 'culture of vocation.' Both the contemporary Catholic vision of a culture of vocation and the Emersonian vision of 'self-reliance' share a set of metaphysical presumptions that are best described as a sort of 'Platonism.' It is against the background of their shared Platonic imaginations—a background often obscured and misunderstood—that a theology of vocation not only begins to make the most sense but also to come across as compelling. The Platonic metaphysics of vocation organize phenomena associated with the subject-side of salvation such that vocation itself might be appreciated as a mode of divine self-communication—the form that revelation takes when it is addressed personally to the individual. In the absence of a well-formed Platonic imagination, one tends to understand vocation within the boundaries of the Epicurean imagination – the 'default' position in much of contemporary society – in which the very idea of being called personally by God can only seem like 'hearing voices,' something either miraculous or pathological, perhaps even bordering on madness. In conclusion, we establish that Emersonian individualism might even have something constructive to offer those engaged in efforts to reconcile People of God and *commuio* approaches to contemporary Catholic ecclesiology.

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Table of Contents

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A few must here be acknowledged my name. Without the relentless encouragement of Andy Harston, Paul Murray and Br. Paul Bednarczyk, this endeavor does not get off the ground, and without the supervision of Chris Insole, it does not come to fruition. Chris's incomparable genius and good cheer afforded me the confidence to push through the challenges and lonely moments. This work does not happen without him, nor without my wife, Deborah, whose tender and steadfast love is more than anything responsible for these ideas taking flight. I love you.

Notes on sources and abbreviations

CCC *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The *Catechism* is published throughout the world by many local publishers. English translations are provided by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops online at https://www.usccb.org/sites/default/files/flipbooks/catechism and by the Vatican at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM (last accessed May 22, 2023).

SM *Sacramentum Mundi*: *An Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. Karl Rahner, Cornelius Ernst and Kevin Smyth, 6 vols. (New York: Herder and Hereder, 1970).

ST *Summa Theologiae.* In this dissertation the *Summa* is cited, for example, as follows: ST I-II, q. 1, a.1, ad. 1, where 'I-II' designates the 'first part of the second part,' 'q.' stands for 'question,' 'a.' for 'article,' 'o.' for objection and 'ad.' for a 'reply to an objection.' The standard translation by the fathers of the English Dominican province is online at https://www.newadvent.org/summa (last accessed May 22, 2023) with Latin in parallel at http://www.logicmuseum.com/wiki/Authors/Thomas_Aquinas/Summa_Theologiae (last accessed May 22, 2023). A new English translation by A. Freddoso is online at https://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/summa-translation/TOC.htm (last accessed May 22, 2023).

Conciliar Documents are cited in English translation from *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996).

- DV *Dei verbum* (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation)
- GS *Gaudium et spes* (Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World)
- LG *Lumen gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church)
- PC *Perfectae caritatis* (Decree on the Up-to-date Renewal of Religious Life)
- UR *Unitatis redintegratio* (Decree on Ecumenism)

These and other magisterial documents cited herein can be found in English translation online at https://www.vatican.va/content/vatican/en.html (last accessed May 29, 2023).

English translations of Kant are from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992-2016). References to the *Critique of Pure Reason* are cited by page numbers in the A and B editions.

Unless otherwise noted, all citations of Emerson give the title of the essay, lecture or sermon cited, followed by the page on which it is located in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Major Prose*, ed. Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), the latest and most easily accessible collection of Emerson's key texts. Citations from sources that are not included in this collection are referred to as follows:

AW *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, ed. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

CS *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Albert J. von Frank, et. al., 4 vols. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989–1992).

CW *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alfred R. Ferguson, et. al., 10 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971-2013).

E *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, Library of America Edition (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1983).

EL *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Robert E. Spiller, et al., 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959–1972).

JMN *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman, et. al., 16 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960–1982).

L *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph L. Rusk and Eleanor M. Tilton, 10 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939–1995).

W *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Fireside Edition, 12 vols. (Boston and New York, 1909). https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/emerson-the-works-of-ralph-waldo-emerson-in-12-vols-fireside-edition (last accessed June 1, 2023).

Chapter 1: Vocation and the Emersonian individual

Introduction

While it did not enter the English language until the 15th century, the word "vocation" can trace its provenance to the Latin *vocare* and the Greek *kaleó* (καλέω), meaning "to call [someone] to [one's] side," properly aloud and personally—that is, by name. St. Paul refers to Jesus as *kalōn (καλῶν*)—the one who calls—and repeatedly to the Christian life as a *klésis* (κλῆσις)—a calling.[1] The first Christians were tellingly referred to simply as the *kalloumenoi* (καλούμενοι)—the ones who are called. The gathering together of those who are called is the *ekklēsia* (ἐκκλησίᾳ), the same word used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew (קָהָל, *qahal*) referring to the assembly of the chosen People of Israel. One way of thinking about it is that, as the Jewish people gathered at Sinai before God to receive the Law, so do Catholics gather as Church to receive the Eucharist.[2]

Thus, for Catholics, the idea of Church—the ecclesial community—is never properly too far removed from the idea of vocation. In the absence of such community—at least the *idea* of such community—there is no vocation and *vice versa*. Catholics are called to commune with one another, and it is in relation to that communion that vocational discernment takes place. Within the community called Church, some may additionally be called to 'states of life' to which special responsibilities attach; nevertheless, fundamentally the construction, maintenance and growth of the community called 'Church' is the vocation common to all Catholics. Christianity—certainly Catholic Christianity—is an irreducibly collective enterprise, and vocation and its related ideas historically have fueled the Church's mission and understanding of its place in the world.

Whereas today the term 'vocation' in the secular world is associated with 'blue collar' work, in the Catholic world it is associated primarily with the Roman collar. Actually, one finds 'vocations' rather than vocation as such generally discussed in Catholic circles, and 'vocations'

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[1] 1 Thes. 5:24; Rom. 11:29; 1 Cor. 1:26; 1 Cor. 7:20; Eph. 1:18; Eph. 4:1; Eph. 4:4; Phil. 3:14; 2 Thes. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:9; Heb. 3:1; 2 Pet. 1:10. On the etymology of vocation, see Larry O'Connell "God's Call to Humankind: Towards a Theology of Vocation," *Chicago Studies* 18, no. 2 (1979), 147-159.

[2] CCC 751. See also, *e.g.* Ex. 12:6; Num. 14:5; Deut. 5:22; 9:10; 10:4. For a full-fledged treatment of the idea of Israel as God's biblical people from a Catholic perspective that also takes Jewish scholarship seriously, see Matthew Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of Israel: Christian Israelology in Dialogue with Ongoing Judaism* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2021).

tends to mean priests and, to a lesser extent, monks and nuns (consecrated men and women religious). Parishioners are asked to pray for new vocations at least a couple of times a year, and those prayers have taken on an increasing sense of urgency in the Global North where vocations to the priesthood and to consecrated life have declined, and declined dramatically, since Vatican II. Over that same period, marriages – traditionally thought of as the quintessential lay vocation – have both failed and failed to be entered into at unprecedented rates, while the Catholic birth rate – traditionally thought of as an indicator that married people are, in fact, 'doing their job' – has also declined. This has led some to conclude that there is a 'crisis of vocations' characteristic of the post-Conciliar Church, an indication, perhaps, that there might be something wrong-headed about the way in which the Vatican II reforms have been received and implemented.

Even if we object to the language of crisis – pointing to, say, anomalously high numbers of vocations in the mid-20th century and viewing the current situation as a return to 'normal' – and in spite of pockets of growth and undeniable vitality, the fact remains that vocations are declining in the Global North at such rates that their continued relevance to the life of the Church and to society at large is in question. Even in the Global South, where they are more plentiful, vocations are not growing at a rate commensurate with the growth of the Catholic population. There is at least an 'issue' here.[3]

Various diagnoses and remedies have been proposed to address this issue, and they tend to share one thing in common. They tend to locate the crux of the issue in a dysfunctional 'culture' both at large and within the Church itself. It should come as no surprise, then, that the Documents of the Church tell us that the ongoing vitality of the Church depends importantly on its capacity to promote a 'culture of vocation.' This phrase— culture of vocation— has its origin in a talk given by Pope John Paul II for the 1992 World Day of Prayer for Vocations. After reminding us to take careful note of the "historic and cultural dimension" of the societies within which the Church finds itself, John Paul contends:

> There is widespread today a culture which leads young people to be satisfied with modest endeavours which are far below their potential. But we all know that really in their hearts there is a restlessness and a lack of satisfaction in the

[3] For a comprehensive survey of the history and impact of Catholic religious life, see the three-volume series by Sandra M. Schneiders, *Religious Life in a New Millennium – Finding the Treasure (Vol. 1), Selling All (Vol.2)* and *Buying the Field (Vol.3)* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000, 2001, 2013). For a survey of the contemporary situation for women religious, especially, see Patricia Wittberg, et al. *God's Call is Everywhere: A Global Analysis of Contemporary Religious Vocations for Women*. (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press Academic, 2023).

> face of ephemeral achievements; there is in them a desire to grow in truth, in authenticity, and in goodness; they await a voice which calls them by name. […] It is necessary, therefore, to promote a culture of vocation which will recognize and welcome this profound human aspiration […] Above all it will be necessary that the pastoral care of young people be explicitly vocational, and that it aims at awakening in youths the consciousness of the divine "call," so that they experience and taste the beauty of giving themselves in a stable programme of life. Each Christian, then, will truly give proof of his collaboration in the promotion of a culture for vocations, if he is able to commit his own mind and heart in discerning what is good for man: if he is able, that is, to discern with a critical spirit the ambiguities of progress, the pseudo-values, the snares of the deceptions which certain civilizations make shine before our eyes, the temptations of materialism and of passing ideologies.[4]

In Verbo tuo (1997) calls out this constellation of 'modest endeavors,' 'ephemeral achievements' and 'pseudo-values' explicitly as constitutive of "a type of antivocational culture" that is "affected by the cold wind of individualism." Here, as elsewhere, 'individualism' names that element of culture that bears the brunt of the blame for the crisis of vocations. All things being equal, vocations wane as individualism waxes, and *vice versa*. Thus, a rhetorical war on individualism is all but inevitable, and, in a culture marked by individualism, it is inconceivable that the promotion of vocations might be anything other than a counter-cultural endeavor.

This dissertation wonders: Perhaps there is another way to think about it? Might there be a path to vocations that says 'yes' to individualism—a way, within the framework of a proper Catholic theology of vocation, to embrace explicitly the best of what individualism has to offer? My answer is that, at the very least, the bogey of 'individualism' should be dispelled and replaced by a more subtle and precise set of diagnostic and therapeutic categories. To such ends, let us look beyond 'vocations' to examine the nature of 'vocation' itself, to see if we might bring some conceptual clarity to our present situation. Let us also interpret individualism more charitably, more historically, surfacing the reasons a certain kind of individualism emerged at a particular time and place, the problems for which this individualism was championed as a solution, and whether those problems and their solutions remain salient for us in our own time.

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[4] John Paul II. Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the XXX World Day Of Prayer For Vocations delivered at Castel Gandolfo, 8 September 1992 https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/vocations/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_08091992_world-day-for-vocations.html (accessed April 28, 2023).

The universal call to holiness

The post-Conciliar Church could not be clearer that members of the laity, not only priests and members of institutes of consecrated life, should think of themselves as having proper vocations, too. The idea of vocation has reasserted itself as a leading idea, and the Documents of the Church since Vatican II have sought to clarify what it might mean to say, in the words of Paul VI, "every man is called upon to develop and fulfill himself, for every life is a vocation."[5]

> [V]ocation is the providential thought of the Creator for each creature, it is his idea-plan, like a dream found in God's heart [...] Vocation is the divine invitation to self-realisation according to this image, and is unique-singular-unrepeatable precisely because this image is inexhaustible. Every creature expresses and is called to express a particular aspect of the thought of God. There he finds his name and his identity; he affirms and ensures his freedom and originality.[6]

Vocation emerges from Vatican II as nothing less than a form of divine revelation, which is to say that what we hear when we hear God call us is a "message of salvation."[7] Such is no ordinary message—I am inclined to deploy the Rahnerian term divine 'self-communication' (*selbst-Mitteilen*) to mark its peculiarity. On the one hand, the use of the term 'vocation' drives home the idea that to be party to divine self-communication is like (albeit not *exactly* like) listening to the spoken word.[8] When what we are listening to is the Word of God, however, the message "does not originally cause and produce something different from [Godself] in the creature, but rather…communicates [God's] own divine reality and makes it a constitutive element in the fulfillment of the creature."[9] The message, messenger and receiver become, from our perspective, conflated in the event of divine self-communication. Insofar as divine self-

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[5] Paul VI. Enc. Lett. *Populorum progressio*, (1967) 15 and 34. https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html (accessed April 28, 2023). Reaffirmed by Benedict XVI in *Cartias in veritate* (2009)16. https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html (accessed April 28, 2023).
[6] Pontifical Work for Ecclesiastical Vocations. *In Verbo Tuo* 18a. Rome 5-10 May 1997) https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_13021998_new-vocations_en.html (accessed April 28, 2023). Cited by John Paul II in the Message of the Holy Father for the XXVII World Day of Prayer for Vocations (6 May 2001). https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/vocations/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20001125_xxxviii-voc-2001.html (accessed April 28, 2023).
[7] DV 1.
[8] DV 2: "[T]he invisible God (see Col. 1;15, 1 Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Ex. 33:11; Jn. 15:14-15) […]"
[9] Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1982), 121.

communication is oversaturated with meaning, ultimately beyond comprehension, its form of address can *feel* impersonal—it is *about* me, but not really intended *for* me; but, insofar as one is not *just* being talked about but also addressed, divine self-communication also comes across as deeply personal. To discern one's calling is to have God's intention for us revealed to us, insofar as it can be, given our limitations as human creatures. It is as if one has been paradoxically *invited* to eavesdrop upon a private conversation God is having with Godself.

The message of salvation since Vatican II has been described at the most general level as a universal call to holiness.

> The Lord Jesus, the divine Teacher and Model of all perfection, preached holiness of life to each and everyone of His disciples of every condition. He Himself stands as the author and consumator of this holiness of life: "Be you therefore perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect." Indeed He sent the Holy Spirit upon all men that He might move them inwardly to love God with their whole heart and their whole soul, with all their mind and all their strength and that they might love each other as Christ loves them. The followers of Christ are called by God, not because of their works, but according to His own purpose and grace. They are justified in the Lord Jesus, because in the baptism of faith they truly become sons of God and sharers in the divine nature. In this way they are really made holy. Then too, by God's gift, they must hold on to and complete in their lives this holiness they have received.[10]

This 'universal call to holiness' is rooted in the Sermon on the Mount, in which Christ calls all to love God and neighbor.[11] In fact, so long as one's love of neighbor "has its motive in God," it just is a manifestation of our love of God.[12] Since elsewhere Christ also calls us to love even our enemies, we are left with few, if any, candidates who can be said to be outside a Christian's circle of loving concern.[13] To love all without exception—this is the "perfection of charity" and the standard by which one traditionally measures Christian holiness.[14]

From its earliest days, the Church recognized that practicing such all-encompassing love is no small feat. What kind of a person is this who loves even his enemies and counsels others to

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[10] LG 40. See also LG 11: "[A]ll the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord, each in his own way, to that perfect holiness whereby the Father Himself is perfect." LG 39: "[E]veryone whether belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared for by it, is called to holiness, according to the saying of the Apostle: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification." cf. Eph. 1:4-5; 10.
[11] *e.g.* Mk. 12:31; Mt. 22:39; Gal. 5:14.
[12] 1 Jn. 4:20.
[13] Mt. 5:44; Lk. 6: 27-29.
[14] Mt. 5:48; 1 Jn 4:16.

do the same? Indeed, Jesus seems to be teaching that to love others the way God loves us will entail nothing less than a profound inner transformation such that it must have seemed unavailable to everyone to the same degree. Most were bound to fall short. In the Christian tradition, then, the pursuit of holiness *per se* was in some sense taken to be an elitist endeavor and, to some degree, an anti-social or counter-cultural one. One of the conceits of monastic life—which emerged by the 3rd century and was institutionalized in the 4th — was that to achieve even a modicum of holiness, withdrawal from the distractions of everyday life and ordinary society is necessary.

While the contemplative and ascetic ideals to which monastic life was devoted were widely admired, they could only be achieved realistically at some distance from 'the world.' Thus, holiness has traditionally been thought of as an extraordinary (perhaps supererogatory) embodiment of love that is facilitated by and through special 'states of life' to which some men and women are specially called. Traditionally, these men and women could understand – and were generally encouraged to understand – their states of life as 'higher' callings. While marriage traditionally has been identified as a state of life, in practice 'higher' callings were more-or-less reserved for those called to ordination and consecration. Their special states of life were supposed to provide the deep structure that both protected them from threats to holiness and, more positively, encouraged their pursuit thereof.

The post-Conciliar teaching of the Church effectively renders this traditional way of thinking about vocation untenable. By grounding the call to holiness fundamentally in the sacrament of baptism, the teaching of the Second Vatican Council effectively democratizes the idea of vocation in a way that depreciates distinctions among the states of life. Consecrated religious life has been especially challenged by the emphasis of the Second Vatican Council on the universal call to holiness. Sr. Patricia Wittberg goes so far as to claim that Vatican II "nullified the basic ideological foundation for eighteen centuries of Roman Catholic religious life."[15] In effect, Vatican II blew open the doors to both the monastery and the sacristy and invited all Christians to make holiness the explicit goal of their lives.

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[15] Patricia Wittberg, *The Rise and Decline of Catholic Religious Orders: A Social Movement Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 214.

Holiness and the human person

The pursuit of holiness is not the same thing as the pursuit of happiness, nor is holiness reducible to moral rectitude, goodness or virtue. God's call is normative, to be sure, but its normativity is neither that of a moral obligation nor a divine command. While at times the normativity of 'to call' in English can overlap substantially with that of 'to command' or 'to order' (as in 'call up' or 'call to arms' in the context of conscription, or 'margin call' in high finance), more typical in contemporary Church documents is the sense that a 'call' is more akin to an invitation, something to which one responds out of desire or hope more than obligation or fear. The sense of 'naming' connoted by 'calling' figures less as an assignment than an opportunity to step into a new identity. That said, 'to call' does connote a sense of urgency not apparent in a verb like 'to ask.' A request or solicitation is more easily ignored than a call. There is presumably less at stake.

Post-Conciliar theology appreciates the ordinary language intuition that God's vocational call is neither a command nor an order, nor is it exactly a polite question or request. It is neither "Do this!" nor "What would you like to do?" The theology treats as significant the vocational "form" in which God ordinarily communicates— the idea that divine revelation can and often does come wrapped in the container of a call, presented to us as an invitation. The vocational call does not *demand* a response. It may anticipate one. It may hope for one; but, a response is not guaranteed. One is free to respond or not to respond to God's call.[16]

This is to say that the documents of Vatican II, especially insofar as they feature the idea of vocation, are unequivocal in showing deep respect for the idea of the human *person*.

> A person is a being who has a sense of self, has a notion of the future and the past, can hold values, make choices; in short, can adopt life-plans. [...] A person must be a being with his own point of view on things. The life-plan, the voices, the sense of self must be attributable to him as in some sense their point of origin. A person is a being who can be addressed, and who can reply.[17]

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[16] "Man has the right to act in conscience and in freedom so as personally to make moral decisions. Luther's denial of a human freedom before grace led the Council of Trent to insist that man is free to co-operate with or refuse grace." (CCC 1782)

[17] Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 97.

Due to the Christian insistence on human sinfulness, the fittingness of our responses to God's vocational call is bound to be always somewhat imperfect; nevertheless, the magisterial documents are clear that it is not enough for our life-plan and "point of view on things" merely to coincide with God's; such plans and points of view must also be, importantly, our own. We have to come by them honestly, so to speak, under the aspect of freedom.

At times, the teaching of the Church takes on a decidedly individualistic tone. Consider a sampling from the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

- "Excessive intervention by the state can threaten personal freedom and initiative" (CCC 1883)
- "The principle of subsidiarity is opposed to all forms of collectivism" (CCC 1885)
- "The human person . . . is and ought to be the principle, the subject, and the object of every social organization" (CCC 1892)

To be sure, Catholic personalism is not the same thing as individualism; nevertheless, in their aversion to collectivism, personalism and individualism share a common enemy. The Church still reserves the word 'individualism' to refer to ideas and attitudes that go too far in their affirmations of human agency to be considered trustworthy allies. It tends to represent individualism as an excess of egoism, even in the personalist tradition with which individualism would seem to garner the most sympathy. For the personalists, individualism names just one way in which persons forget their full personhood; collectivism is the other way, and it is thought to be at least as dangerous.

Whither the greater threat to human dignity lies is an open question (perhaps perennially so); but, for those constitutionally inclined to side against collectivism, the potential interpretive rewards of employing an old-fashioned, allegedly outmoded term like individualism will *ceteris paribus* outweigh the risks. One reason to preserve individualism as a critical term is that no word has done more (personalism comes close) to register an aversion to certain malignant forms of collectivism, an aversion which both the contemporary Church and friends of individualism share. In short, individualism's anti-collectivist *bona fides* are beyond reproach.

Individualism: A "hatred of power," "a considered and peaceful sentiment"

The *mentalité* that came to be called, in the French, *individualisme*, arose out of the revolutionary convulsions of 1776 and 1789; but, the term itself came into its own in the 19th century. The disciples of Claude Henri de Saint-Simon were the first to use the term *individualisme* systematically in the mid 1820s to refer to phenomena Saint-Simon himself referenced by the more established terms 'egoism' and 'anarchy.'[18] Of individualism the Saint-Simonians were critical. They lumped together the likes of Locke, Reid, Condillac, Kant, d'Holbach, Voltaire and Rousseau as "defenders of individualism," allied in their "opposition to any attempt at organization from a center of direction for the moral interests of mankind, to hatred of power."[19] So understood, individualism figured to be an obstacle not only to the sort of progress Saint-Simon was seeking but also to the recovery of tradition, both sacred and secular. In their disdain for individualism, atheistic utopian socialists found themselves on the same side as theocratic monarchists and the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church. For the republican, mostly Protestant citizens of the new United States, neither was thought to be a bad enemy to have.

While the first use of the term 'individualism' in English was probably in the translation of Michel Chevalier's *Lettres sur l'Amerique du Nord* (1839), it was Arthur Goldhammer's use of the term in his English translation of the second volume of Alexis de Tocqueville's *De La Démocratie en Amérique* (1840) that made individualism famous.[20] In that work, individualism names "a considered and peaceful sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and to withdraw to the side with his family and his friends; so that, after thus creating a small society for his own use, he willingly abandons the large society to itself."[21] Thus, for de Tocqueville, individualism is not exactly opposed to something like socialism or collectivism (two more '-isms' coined in the 19th century). Its implications are neither

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[18] Koenraad W. Swart, "'Individualism' in the Mid-Nineteenth Century (1826-1860)," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 23, no. 1 (1962): 79.
[19] Steven Lukes, "The Meanings of 'Individualism.'" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 32 no. 1 (1971): 47-48.
[20] Swart, "Individualism," 86.
[21] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition*, vol. 3, ch. 2 (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1840), 882: https://oll-resources.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/oll3/store/titles/2287/Tocqueville_1532-03_EN.html (accessed May 21, 2023): "L'individualisme est un sentiment réfléchi et paisible qui dispose chaque citoyen à s'isoler de la masse de ses semblables et à se retirer à l'écart avec sa famille et ses amis; de telle sorte que, après s'être ainsi créé une petite société à son usage, il abandonne volontiers la grande société à elle-même."

aggressively radical nor counterrevolutionary. Individualism rather names a predilection for a *kind* of sociality, not an aversion to sociality as such. Reduced to a slogan, the sentiment is more akin to "Live and let live" than "Get off my lawn!"

Individualism in America developed alongside, not really opposed to, the idea of Church and the practice of Christianity. In fact, individualism was understood by many 19th century Americans as indicative of the growth of a mature, 'enlightened' Christian faith. Indeed, empirically speaking, Christianity seemed to be flourishing in the democratic United States in ways it was not in Europe, a fact that initially perplexed de Tocqueville who, like many of his peers, assumed that the new American attitudes were a death knell for the practice of organized religion, especially those like the Catholic Church which he perceived (rightly or wrongly) to rely on centralized authority structures. Eventually, de Tocqueville came to appreciate individualism as more of an opportunity than a crisis for the Church:

> Men today are naturally little disposed to believe; but as soon as they have a religion, they find a hidden instinct within themselves that pushes them without their knowing toward Catholicism. Several of the doctrines and practices of the Roman Church astonish them; but they experience a secret admiration for its government, and its great unity attracts them. If Catholicism succeeded finally in escaping from the political hatreds to which it gave birth, I hardly doubt that this very spirit of the century, which seems so contrary to it, would become very favorable to it, and that it would suddenly make great conquests.[22]

In a contemporary (1841) review in the *Boston Quarterly Review* of *De La Démocratie en Amérique*, an anonymous author, noting de Tocqueville's favorable assessment of Catholicism's prospects in America, writes:

> The first distinct development of awakened mind is, that it cannot think and believe by authority; that it has within itself the perception, or the revelations of Truths. Thus it is, that the "individualism," which de Tocqueville so clearly discerns in the United States; that strong confidence in self, or reliance upon one's own exertion and resources, is precisely the antipodal principle of a tyrannical Catholicism. The strife of all our citizens for wealth and distinction *of their own*, and their contempt of reflected honors, their easy familiarity with persons in authority, or of eminence, of which this observer has seen so much, disprove, most effectively, his Roman Catholic prophesy. Nevertheless, he is only in error from defect of inductive property. There is a Catholicism, a pure

[22] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition,* vol. 3, ch. 6 (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1840), 755: https://oll-resources.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/oll3/store/titles/2287/Tocqueville_1532-03_EN.html33-4 (last accessed May 21, 2023).

> and peaceful Catholicism maturing in these United States; but one which is as foreign to the Roman or any other olden form of general religion, as light is to darkness.[23]

While it does not exactly reflect what de Tocqueville actually said (he never defined individualism as 'strong confidence in self'), this passage does capture the characteristic way in which the strain of individualism with which we are concerned here tended to view faith as compatible with both an aversion to centralized authority and a confidence in the capacities of the ordinary 'awakened' human person. For the author of this review, there is no question that whatever prospects a 'pure and peaceful Catholicism' (or, for that matter, any religion) might enjoy depended in large part upon the capacity of Catholicism to adapt its 'olden,' 'tyrannical' forms to better accommodate, express and embody individualism and thereby become something appropriately American and modern. It may have taken a while, but I contend that the treatment of vocation by the Second Vatican Council and subsequent reflections by the magisterium did just this.

The contemporary teaching on vocation is developed mainly in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (1964), the Dogmatic Constitutions *Lumen Gentium* (1964) and *Dei Verbum* (1965) and the Decree *Perfectae Caritas* (1965) as well as the following encyclicals of three post-Conciliar popes:

- John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (1996)
- Benedict XVI's Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* (2007)
- Francis's Encyclical Letter *Lumen Fidei* (2013) and Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exultate* (2018)

Another key source is the Pontifical Work for Ecclesiastical Vocations, *New Vocations for a New Europe (In Verbo tuo...)* (1998) which is the final document of the Congress on Vocations to the Priesthood and to Consecrated Life in Europe held in Rome, May 5-10, 1997. It was authored jointly by the Congregations for Catholic Education, for the Oriental Churches and for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Strikingly, no systematic theology

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[23] Anonymous, "Catholicism." Review of *Democracy in America. Part Second. The Social Influence of Democracy* by Alexis de Tocqueville. *The Boston Quarterly Review* 4, no. 15 (1841): 325-6. https://archive.org/details/sim_boston-quarterly-review_1841-07_4/page/320/mode/2up (last accessed May 19, 2023).

has been developed within the Catholic tradition that treats vocation as its leading idea, although Edward P. Hahenberg's *Awakening Vocation* (2010) and Fr. Jacques Philippe's *Called to Life* (2008) offer strong systematic reflections on the concept itself.[24] This dissertation attempts another small step in the general direction of such a project.

Methodological note: Receptive Ecumenism

Within the academic study of religion, vocation is a concept that cuts across theological sub-disciplines— soteriology, Christology and ecclesiology, at least— and so can serve as a unifying concept around which a systematic exposition of theology might usefully be organized. Treating vocation as a leading idea can help us to find the middle ground between the rigidity and dogmatism into which fundamentalist and confessional approaches to theology often lead us, on the one hand, and a solipsistic self-indulgence to which more subjectivist, experience-based theologies often tend, on the other. In rhetorical terms, the conceptual gravity of 'vocation' keeps us firmly anchored to the shoals of divine *logos*, resisting the drift toward excessive *ethos* or *pathos* as we seek to understand the meaning of God's ongoing revelation.

To me, the Church's allergy to the language of individualism indicates an incomplete reception of the soteriological, anthropological and ecclesiological consequences of the theology of vocation adopted by the Second Vatican Council; at the same time, the indifference and sometimes hostility that many would-be defenders of individualism display toward the Church generally indicates their failure to appreciate just how friendly the teachings of the Second Vatican Council are to their cause. Thus, one way of thinking about this project is to see it as a sort of *ecumenical* exercise. Indeed, vocation as a concept has the advantage of being rich in ecumenical and evangelical potential. It is an important concept in Protestant circles, playing a major role especially in the thought of Martin Luther.[25] It is also a concept that carries weight in the secular world. Michael Novak and Andre Delbecq, for instance, speak of business leaders as

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[24] Edward P. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2010). Jacques Philippe, *Called to life*. Translated by Neal Carter (New York: Scepter Publishers, 2008).

[25] Gustaf Wingren, *The Christian's Calling: Luther on Vocation*. Translated by Carl C. Rasmussen (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1958) is the definitive modern treatment of Luther's idea of vocation. For a more contemporary review, see John T. Pless "Gustaf Wingren's 'Luther on Vocation' after Sixty-five Years," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 10, No. 8 (August 2010): https://learn.elca.org/jle/gustaf-wingrens-luther-on-vocation-after-sixty-five-years (last accessed January 8, 2024). For a critique of Windgren's approach, see Kenneth Hagen, "A Critique of Wingren on Luther on Vocation," *Lutheran Quarterly* 16 (Autumn 2002): 249–274.

being authentically 'called' to serve their enterprises.[26] Their scholarship suggests that those who see their work as a calling, rather than, say, a career, are different motivationally and make for happier, more productive employees.[27]

I think of this project specifically as an exercise in *Receptive* Ecumenism, a term coined by Paul D. Murray to name the current 'third phase' of the modern ecumenical movement.[28] This movement's first phase grew out of the experiences of 19th-century Protestant missionaries, mainly, who thought the hostility and mistrust they tended to demonstrate toward one another as they competed for "souls and turf" was unseemly, undercutting gospel messages of peace, love and reconciliation that they were ostensibly sent forth to proclaim. Their initial ecumenical efforts tended to be more pragmatic than theological, concerned primarily with building relationships among members of separated traditions and encouraging direct personal experience of those traditions through collaboration in worship and work. Such efforts led to the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference out of which emerged the International Missionary Council in 1921, the Life and Work Movement in 1925 and the Faith and Order Movement in 1927.[29] At the Oxford Conference on Church, Community and State in 1937, the Life and Work Movement – focused on practice – and the Faith and Order Movement – focused on doctrine –

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[26] Francis. *Evangellium Gaudii* 203: "Business is a vocation, and a noble vocation, provided that those engaged in it see themselves challenged by a greater meaning in life; this will enable them truly to serve the common good by striving to increase the goods of this world and to make them more accessible to all."

[27] See, for instance, Michael Novak, *Business as a Calling: Work and the Examined Life* (New York: Free Press, 2013). Andre L. Delbecq, *Spiritual Intelligence at Work: Meaning, Metaphor, and Morals* (Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing, 2003). James J. McGee and Andre L. Delbecq, "Vocation as a Critical Factor in a Spirituality for Executive Leadership in Business," in *Business, Religion and Spirituality: A New Synthesis,* ed. Oliver F. Williams (South Bend: University of Notre Dame, 2003), 94 -110. Paul Adler, Charles Heckscher and Laurence Prusak, "Building a Collaborative Enterprise," *Harvard Business Review* (July-August 2011): 49.

[28] On Murray's understanding of the 'twofold way' by which Receptive Ecumenism proceeds, as well as his assessment of the place of Receptive Ecumenism within the broad tradition of systematic, yet pragmatically-inclined theology, see: Paul D. Murray, "Growing into the Fullness of Christ: Receptive Ecumenism as a Way of Ecclesial Conversion" in *Receptive Ecumenism as Transformative Ecclesial Learning: Walking the Way to a Church Re-formed*, ed. Paul D. Murray, Gregory A. Ryan, and Paul Lakeland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 463-479. Paul D. Murray, "Discerning the Call of the Spirit to Theological Ecclesial Renewal: Notes on Being Reasonable and Responsible in Receptive Ecumenical Learning," in *Leaning into the Spirit: Ecumenical Perspectives on Discernment and Decision-Making in the Church*, ed. Virginia Miller, David Moxon, and Stephen Pickard (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 217–34. Paul D. Murray, "Foreword: Receptive Ecumenism as a Leaning in to the Spirit of Loving Transformation,' in *Receptive Ecumenism: Listening, Learning, and Loving in the Way of Christ*, ed. Vicky Balabanski and Geraldine Hawkes (Adelaide: ATF, 2018), xv–xxiii. Paul D. Murray, "Introducing Receptive Ecumenism," *The Ecumenist* 51, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 1-8. Paul D. Murray, "Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Receiving Gifts for Our Needs," *Louvain Studies* 33 (2008): 30-45.

[29] In 1961 the International Missionary Council united with the World Council of Churches, forming its Division of World Mission and Evangelism.

accepted a plan to merge into one organization, the World Council of Churches (WCC), which was formally established in 1948.

Although there was no official Catholic representation at the inaugural conference of the WCC in Amsterdam, by 1949, Pius XII was allowing for Catholic participation in some ecumenical gatherings under careful supervision. In 1951, in order to help advise the WCC on Catholic doctrine, future Cardinal Johannes (Jan) Willebrands and Fr. Frans Thijssen began organizing the Catholic Conference for Ecumenical Questions, which culminated in a meeting of 24 theologians at the residence of Bishop Charrière of Lausanne, Geneva and Fribourg in August 1952 just prior to the Third World Conference of Faith and Order in Lund, Sweden. In 1958, then Msgr. Willebrands became the first Catholic theologian to teach at the Ecumenical Institute of the WCC at Bossey. He attended the meeting of the Central Committee of the WCC in St. Andrews in 1960 as an observer, along with three other Catholic priests. Also in 1960, John XXIII, in preparation for the Second Vatican Council, established the Secretariat (now Council) for the Promotion of Christian Unity. Cardinal Augustin Bea, SJ, the former rector of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, was appointed its first president and Mgsr. Willebrands its first Secretary.[30]

These activities constitute the 'first phase' of ecumenical engagement, in which the importance of building personal connections and quality relationships is emphasized. Receptive Ecumenism recognizes such 'first-phase' engagements as essential; but, at the same time, it calls for a more sober 'second phase' that is more fully aware of structural, doctrinal and cultural impediments to full communion among the Christian churches. Second-phase ecumenism was energized by Vatican II. With the Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio)* and the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium)*, the Catholic Church began to articulate a positive, post-Tridentine understanding of itself, acknowledging formally that other Christian communities possess "significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and

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[30] Also part of the original four staff were Msgr. Jean-François Arrighi and Thomas F. Stransky, CSP. See Dietmar W. Winkler "Vatican II and Ecumenism after Forty Years: Whence Have We Come Where Are We Going?" in *The Harp (Volume 20 Part 1): Festschrift: Rev. Dr. Jacob Thekeparampil*, ed. Geevarghese Panicker, Rev. Jacob Thekeparampil and Abraham Kalakudi (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2011), 295-316. John Borelli, "In the Beginning: How the Work of Christian Unity Got Started," *America* (October 1, 2012): https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/5152/article/beginning (last accessed January 8, 2024). For a comprehensive survey of the ecumenical movement, see Barry Till, *The Churches Search for Unity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972). Robert S. Bilheimer, *Breakthrough: The Emergence of the Ecumenical Tradition* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1989).

give life to the church itself" and that such gifts "the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using […] as means of salvation."[31] The big idea was that Christians are united by sharing in a common baptism, and this ought to be treated as a bond far stronger than the pressures that seek to divide them.

In 1967 the Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) was established, followed shortly thereafter by the Methodist-Roman Catholic International Commission (MRCIC). So much was achieved so fast in the period immediately following Vatican II that full communion seemed something that might be plausibly achieved within a generation. Such hopes, however, have not been realized; in fact, in the words of Murray, "despite the undoubted historic achievements, the structural, sacramental, and ministerial reconciliation of the traditions now seems further away than ever, causing many to speak of an ecumenical winter or of an ecumenical *cul-de-sac*. The great wave of reconciliation through theological clarification appears to have crashed on the beach, dissipating its energy and leaving some of the great dialogue documents as the high-water mark of a tide now turned."[32]

Undaunted, Receptive Ecumenism intends to overcome the challenges surfaced in ecumenism's prior two phases.

> At the heart […] of Receptive Ecumenism is the assumption that any further formal progress towards the abiding ecumenical goal of full structural and sacramental unity will only be possible if each tradition moves from asking how other traditions need to change and focuses instead on its own difficulties and tensions and consequent need to learn, or receive, from the best discernible practice and associated understanding in other traditions. This reflects a move away from ideal theorized, purely doctrinally driven ecclesiological constructs in ecumenical dialogue and a definite move towards taking the lived reality of traditions absolutely seriously, together with the difficulties and problems, tensions and contradictions to be found there.[33]

One practices Receptive Ecumenism who attends carefully to the way in which the reception and donation of ideas and practices affect interrelated webs of understanding (doctrine), habit (culture), procedure and structure within traditions. From a Catholic point of view, Receptive

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[32] Paul D. Murray, "Introducing Receptive Ecumenism," *The Ecumenist* 51, No. 2 (Spring 2014): 4.
[33] *Ibid.*

Ecumenism is a response to the call for catholicity, the *kath'olos,* of the Roman Church.[34] My contention is that the catholicity of the contemporary Church would be enhanced if the Church was able to accommodate, embody and express individualism in ways that are consistent with the promotion of a culture of vocation. Said another way, I am trying to facilitate a *rapprochement* between individualistic and anti-individualistic understandings of vocation and practices of vocation promotion. I see it as a modest contribution to the grander project, ongoing since Vatican II, of figuring out how Catholics should receive various aspects of modernity. One might also view it as part of the ongoing debate as to how 'Americanism' should be incorporated (if at all) into the Church. Of course, not everything about modernity and America is good for the Church. One thing that theology can do, however, is help the Church fully inventory the intellectual resources at its disposal, separating the wheat from the chaff as it goes along.

Receptive Ecumenism is normally practiced with institutions in mind (congregations, parishes, councils), and while individualism is not a separate Christian church or denomination in and of itself, it is a constellation of ideas and values that enjoys quasi-religious status within a number of Christian traditions and institutions, perhaps most notably within Unitarian Universalism. Even more significantly, however, individualism is implicitly professed among those who explicitly profess no religious affiliation—the religious 'nones' who represent the fastest-growing cohort of young adults in the United States, Western Europe and parts of Latin America. They are also among the most stigmatized groups in religiously conservative parts of the developing world.[35]

Can there be an authentically Catholic individualism? Any affirmative answer to that question hinges on our ability to answer the charge that individualism is bound to be, by its very nature, anti-vocational. One thing I hope we end up with by the end of this project is a framework for distinguishing vocational from anti-vocational forms of individualism. This framework will also, I hope, be compelling to all but the most reactionary anti-modernists.

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[34] Paul D. Murray, forward to *Receptive Ecumenism and the Renewal of the Ecumenical Movement: The Path of Ecclesial Conversion* by Antonia Pizzey (Leiden: Brill, 2019), xi–xii.
[35] University of Southern California, Center for Religion and Civic Culture: https://crcc.usc.edu/topic/religious-nones (last accessed May 21, 2023).

Introducing Emerson

To assist us on this mission of *rapprochement*, we will be enlisting the services of Ralph Waldo Emerson. One may legitimately ask: "Why?" After all, Emerson was not a Catholic, nor was he known to have any special affection for the Church. Vocation was not a critical term for him. Moreover, few would consider him a proper theologian, even in his own time. True enough; but, if we are to give individualism a fair shake, it behooves us to work with its most masterful exposition. It is my contention that the distinctive form of individualism to which Emerson so ably gives voice, once superficialities are set aside, resonates deeply with post-Conciliar themes surrounding vocation, that Emersonian individualism turns out to be, from a Catholic point of view, a prematurely vocational individualism.

Before diving deeply into the nature of Emersonian individualism, let us briefly attend to the relevant biographical details of the man himself. The Emerson family came to Massachusetts from England with the first generation of Puritan settlers in the 1630s. The family produced a steady stream of congregationalist ministers, including William Emerson (1769-1811), father of Ralph Waldo. William, however, had little direct influence on his son's mature thought – he died when Ralph Waldo was eight years old. It was rather through the eclectic eyes of William's sister, Mary Moody Emerson, that Ralph Waldo Emerson (simply Emerson heretoforward) received his earliest Christian formation. For his Aunt Mary, authentic Christianity was to be found somewhere between the too "coarse [and] damnatory" Calvinism of the Puritan settlers and the too "timid [and] easy" liberal faith of her brother.[36] That Emerson throughout his life refused to choose between these two poles is a testament to just how seriously he took his aunt's theological counsel.

Emerson did follow in his father's footsteps by becoming an ordained minister in the spring of 1829. In the autumn, after a brief courtship, he married Ellen Tucker. Neither his marriage nor his ministry would last long. Ellen died from complications related to tuberculosis in February 1831. Despite the prestigiousness of his appointment—the Second Church at which he was licensed to preach was the church of the Mathers and, most recently, Henry Ware, Jr., who left in 1830 to join his father, Henry Ware, Sr., on the faculty of Harvard College—Emerson

[36] Nancy Craig Simmons, *The Selected Letters of Mary Moody Emerson* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), xxxvi. See also W 10:593-601.

resigned from his ministry in 1832, ostensibly on the grounds that he could no longer subscribe to the traditional doctrines surrounding Eucharistic celebration. As we will come to see, there was a little more to it than that.

Late in 1832, Emerson embarked on a ten-month trip to Europe, beginning in Italy, proceeding through France and culminating in England. Along the way, he sat down with William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle, among other notables. (Emerson would become Carlyle's literary agent in the United States). In 1835, Emerson and his new wife, Lydia Jackson, settled in Concord, Massachusetts, where he set out his key ideas in a short book, *Nature*, published anonymously (although Emerson's authorship was an open secret) in 1836.[37] In 1837, Emerson delivered the Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard, "The American Scholar," and his notoriety was firmly established following his provocative 1838 address to the graduating class of Harvard Divinity School. He would not be invited back to Harvard for 29 years.

The Emerson's home in Concord gradually became a pilgrimage site for an eclectic troupe of men and women of ideas and American letters. Friends like Elizabeth Hoar, Louisa May Alcott, Margaret Fuller and Henry Thoreau were frequent guests. Frustrated that established journals such as the *North American Review* and the *Christian Examiner* refused to publish their work, Emerson, along with Bronson Alcott and George Ripley, founded *The Dial*, a journal modeled on *The Western Messenger* and European periodicals like England's *The Monthly Magazine*. The first issue was published in July 1840 under the editorship of Fuller. Emerson himself edited the journal from 1842 until its final issue in 1844.[38] The commercial failure of *The Dial* belies its cultural influence. Horace Greeley called it the "most original and thoughtful periodical ever published in this country."[39]

Emerson's own essays, a first and second series of which were published in 1841 and 1844, respectively, were largely based on his public lectures, which he began offering in 1833 after returning from his first European journey. By 1839, Emerson's typically well-attended lectures were the principal source of income for the Emerson family. The pattern of converting his public lectures into volumes of essays continued throughout his life—as Steven Whicher puts

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[37] *Nature* received much more attention when it was re-released under Emerson's name in 1847.
[38] The exception was the April 1843 issue, for which Thoreau served as editor.
[39] Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 130.

it: "Emerson molded his books on the rostrum."[40] In 1845, Emerson began lecturing on "The Uses of Great Men," a series that led to the publication of *Representative Men* (1850). That same year Emerson visited England for the second time, his observations serving as the basis of his subsequent lectures on the "Natural History of Intellect" and his collection of essays *English Traits* (1856). In 1851, he began a series of lectures which would become *The Conduct of Life* (1860). Following the American Civil War, twelve essays were published in the volume *Society and Solitude* (1870), seven of which had been previously published in whole or in part. All told, Emerson gave about 1,500 public lectures over a period of 40 years, traveling as far as California. By all accounts, Emerson was a captivating speaker, something even those who were less than enthusiastic about his ideas were forced to admit. By the time of his death in 1882, Emerson had become a major figure in American letters, arguably the country's first public intellectual.

Emerson's own published writings have never gone out of print, something that both indicates and contributes to Emerson's ongoing relevance. The first collected edition of Emerson's works, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* was published in London in two volumes in 1866. Emerson's son, Edward Waldo, edited the 12-volume *Centenary Edition of the Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1903–1904) which served as the basis for a variety of popular collections that kept Emerson accessible to a broad audience, including *The Portable Emerson* (1946), edited by Mark Van Doren, the Modern Library Edition of *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo* Emerson (1950), edited by Brooks Atkinson, and *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1965), edited by William H. Gilman. The *Centenary Edition* remained the scholarly standard until *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* began publication in 1971, culminating with the publication of the tenth volume in 2013. The *Collected Works* served as the basis for the Library of America volumes of Emerson's *Essays and Lectures* (1983), edited by Joel Porte, and *Collected Poems & Translations* (1994), edited by Harold Bloom and Paul Kane. Most recently, Belknap Press has combined a selection of sermons, lectures, addresses and essays together in a single volume *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Major*

[40] EL 1:v.

Prose (2015), edited by Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson, which serves as a companion to *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Major Poetry* (2015), edited by Albert J. Von Frank.

The reception of Emerson

Articles about Emerson, his writings and his legacy number in the thousands, and many 'Emersons' have emerged over the years in relation to whom different critical projects have either sought or resisted his association. Let us confess that this literature review is personal, a guide to the principal works that inform *my* Emerson.

Emerson's death in 1882 was naturally the occasion for more than a few panegyrics. Walt Whitman, whose *Leaves of Grass* Emerson called "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed," returned the favor, gushing, that "as Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg, it is not we who come to consecrate the dead—we reverently come to receive, if so it may be, some consecration to ourselves and daily work from him."[41] It did not take long for more sober assessments of Emerson's legacy to surface. Even Whitman eventually took his shots: "Emerson, in my opinion, is not most eminent as poet or artist or teacher, though valuable in all those. He is best as critic, or diagnoser. Not passion or imagination or warp or weakness, or any pronounced cause or specialty, dominates him. Cold and bloodless intellectuality dominates him."[42] Here Whitman encapsulates the two main lines of criticism to which Emerson has been habitually subjected. Emerson is typically denied the mantle of a truly serious thinker—he is an amateur, into matters over his head, not *really* a proper philosopher, or theologian or political theorist; and, he is taken to task for lacking the proper enthusiasms, especially for being insufficiently enthusiastic about politics.[43] It is alleged that Emerson's

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[41] Walt Whitman, "By Emerson's Grave" from *Specimen Days* in *Complete Prose Works* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1892), 197. https://whitmanarchive.org/published/other/CompleteProse.html#leaf102r1 (last accessed May 2, 2023).

[42] Walt Whitman, "Emerson's Books (the Shadows of Them)" from *Democratic Vistas* in *Complete Prose Works* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1892), 320. https://whitmanarchive.org/published/other/CompleteProse.html#leaf163r1 (last accessed May 2, 2023).

[43] Emerson's philosophical ambitions tend to go "unnoticed," according to Stanley Cavell, "because of the endlessly repeated rumor that Emerson was not much of a thinker. (How eager his culture has been, top to bottom, to nourish this rumor! What's in it?" See Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 137-8.

thinking is too removed from the 'struggle' for freedom, righteousness or social justice. In both cases, Emerson stands as a figure representing a stage of thought that, however inevitable it might be in the overall process of human development, must be superseded. As Whitman put it: "The best part of Emersonianism is, it breeds the giant that destroys itself."[44]

The most charitable members of Emerson's first camp of critics tend to follow the lead of Matthew Arnold, who lectured on Emerson in Boston in 1883 and published his lecture in his *Discourses on America* (1885). For Arnold, Emerson fell short of 'greatness' as poet and philosopher; but, with respect to his "hopeful, serene, beautiful temper," Emerson was unmatched: "[N]ever had man such a sense of the inexhaustibleness of nature, and such hope."[45] Arnold here echoes the conclusions of Emerson's contemporary, James Russell Lowell, who having once mocked Emerson in his 1848 satirical poem *A Fable for Critics* as a "mystagogue" was compelled by 1871 to conclude: "We look upon him as one of the few men of genius whom our age has produced, and there needs no better proof of it than his masculine faculty of fecundating other minds. Search for eloquence in his books and you will perchance miss it, but meanwhile you will find that it has kindled your thoughts."[46] Emerson is to be read, then, chiefly for inspiration.

That same inspirational quality, worthy of praise by Lowell and Arnold, came to be seen by Henry James as indicative of a New World, American *naïveté* that contrasted with Old World, European sophistication. In a review of James Elliot Cabot's *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1887), James suggests that it was not Emerson's "remarkable outburst of Romanticism on Puritan ground" but rather the pragmatism of Henry's brother William James that pointed the way forward for the American mind.[47] Post-Emersonian philosophy was to be, in the words of Morton White, "tough, logical, and professional."[48] In retrospect, however, F. O. Matthiessen's

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[44] Walt Whitman, "Emerson's Books (the Shadows of Them)" from *Democratic Vistas* in *Complete Prose Works* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1892), 322. https://whitmanarchive.org/published/other/CompleteProse.html#leaf163r1 (last accessed May 2, 2023).
[45] Matthew Arnold, "Emerson" in *Discourses in America* (London: Macmillan & co., 1896), 193-4. https://archive.org/details/discoursesiname00arnogoog/page/n205/mode/2up?ref=ol&view=theater&q=temper (accessed May 2, 2023).
[46] James Russell Lowell, "Emerson the Lecturer" in *My Study Windows* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and company, 1899), 377. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t7tm7th4m&view=1up&seq=7 (last accessed May 2, 2023).
[47] Quoted in *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Library of America, 1984), 315-457.
[48] Morton Gabriel White, *Science and Sentiment in America: Philosophical Thought from Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 112.

assessment that "Emerson's idealism provided a more central root for pragmatism than has generally been assumed" has been confirmed.[49] Still, even as Cornel West, in *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (1989), restores Emerson to his position as godfather of American pragmatism, the basic tenet holds: What Emerson said others have since said better. He is to be appreciated, to be sure; but, mainly for purely literary or historical reasons. It is no longer really necessary to read him.

George Santayana set the tone for much early 20th century criticism of Emerson by combining Lowell's intimations of 'mystagoguery' with an intensification of Henry James' charge of *naïveté.* In *The Optimism of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1886) and his more critical *Emerson* (1900), Santayana claims Emerson's mysticism (and mysticism generally) underwrites a distorted picture of the moral universe in which "evil is not explained, it is forgotten; it is not cured, but condoned."[50] Santayana concludes that even though Emerson avoids a naïve optimism (associated by Santayana with the name Leibniz), he nevertheless, in the final analysis, cannot sufficiently countenance evil. We might say that what Emersonian individualism seemed to lack was a compelling theodicy.

Critics following in Santayana's footsteps contend – contrary to John Dewey, who, in 1903, assessed that "the coming century may well make evident that is just now dawning, that Emerson is not only a philosopher, but that he is the Philosopher of Democracy" – that Emersonian individualism inspires a sort of quietism, an aloof conservatism inadequate to the political challenges and moral demands facing the 20th century.[51] For them, the real issue is not that Emerson is insufficiently *philosophical* but that his philosophy trucks in *bad* ideas—ideas that have consequences that are bad for *democracy*. The contention is that, while Emerson himself may have been on the 'right side' of social movements such as abolition, women's suffrage and the resettlement of native peoples, he was so despite, not in virtue of, his individualism. In fact, Emerson's individualism does not reinforce but actually undermines the

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[49] F. O. Matthiessen, *The American Renaissance* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2009 [1941]), 58 note 36.
[50] George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, ed. William G. Holzberger and Herman J. Saatkamp Jr. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990 [1900]), 137. https://santayana.iupui.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/George-Santayana-Interpretations-of-Poetry-and-Religion.pdf (last accessed May 2, 2023).
[51] John Dewey, "Emerson-The Philosopher of Democracy," *International Journal of Ethics* 13, no. 4 (1903): 405-13. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2376270 (last accessed May 22, 2023).

right kind of democratic politics (which is to say, *progressive* politics sufficiently *left* of center). Emerson was only accidentally radical.

The post-war Emerson was a Cold War Emerson, a resource for the newly emerging field of American Studies to mine in pursuit of a morally praiseworthy form of American "exceptionalism." The Emersonians generally provided a nice contrast to the monochromatic, authoritarian personalities thought to dominate in the cultures of the new Soviet and Maoist enemies. Cast in opposition to mindless conformism and the personal stultification thought to be endemic to totalitarianisms on both the right and the left, Emersonian individualism tended to be viewed in a more favorable light as an exportable cultural product, its apparent naïveté recast as a kind of hope in the future, something positively charming, even virtuous.

At the same time, it was also becoming apparent that Emerson was a more complex and conflicted character than had been hitherto presumed. Facilitating mid-century Emerson scholarship was the publication of a collection of his sermons entitled *Young Emerson Speaks: Unpublished Discourses on Many Subjects* (1938), edited by Arthur Cushman McGiffert, Jr., and the release of the first of the eventual ten volumes of the Columbia University Press edition of *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1939), edited by Ralph L. Rusk.[52] Furthermore, both Perry Miller's *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (1939) and F.O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941) brought forgotten context to bear on the ideas of Emerson and his peers. Vivian C. Hopkins's *Spires of Form: A Study of Emerson's Aesthetic Theory* (1951) and Sherman Paul's Emerson's *Angle of Vision* (1952) deserve special mention for identifying, correctly, I think, the notion of a Neoplatonic "correspondence" between man and nature as a key to unlocking some of Emerson's more fundamental insights. These historically and culturally sensitive studies helped to humanize Emerson and allowed for the Emersonians to be imagined in new ways.

Rusk's biography *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1949) offered the first major synthesis of the new attitudes and freshly published materials.[53] Stephen Whicher's *Freedom and*

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[52] The *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson* had already been published in ten volumes between 1909-1914 by Houghton Mifflin in Boston.

[53] The *Collected Letters* contain 2,313 of Emerson's letters that had never before been printed and 271 that had been only partly printed. It excluded the 509 letters that have been printed elsewhere, including Emerson's correspondence with Thomas Carlyle, Arthur Hugh Clough, Samuel Gray Ward, Herman Grimm, William Henry

Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1953) complemented Rusk's biography by focusing on Emerson's struggle to reconcile the call to political and social activism, on the one hand, with the call to a more traditionally contemplative life, on the other. Whicher posits a crisis period beginning sometime around 1838, after which "the image of the hero-scholar, leading mankind to the promised land, steadily gave way to the solitary observer, unregarded and unregarding of the multitude."[54] This more sober, tragic Emerson resonated with the 'beat' mood midcentury and energized a generation of Emerson scholarship. In 1955, the newly formed Emerson Society began publication of the *Emerson Society Quarterly*.[55] In 1959, Harvard University Press began publication of *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (completed 1972). In 1960, publication of *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson* began (completed 1982). Emerson's journals and notebooks document a restless and probing mind at work, helping to confirm the picture of Whicher's more angst-ridden Emerson. This Emerson appeared especially attractive to the counter-cultural and youth movements of the 1950s-60s, as the 'Red Scare' inspired a culture of fear and repression that felt to many as authoritarian as those cultures against which the United States were supposed to be resisting.

Emerson (and Thoreau) found themselves figuring prominently in Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) as prophets alerting us to the insidious creep of technology and technocracy, making the Emersonians useful touchstones for the nascent environmental movement. Martin Luther King, Jr. made no secret of his admiration of Henry David Thoreau, and even though Thoreau's direct influence on King's thought might have been minimal, the suggestion that the Emersonians might have something relevant to say to and about the civil rights movement intrigued many.[56] What started to emerge was the possibility of an Emerson

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Furness and John Sterling. Over 1,281 of the over 4,374 letters Emerson is known to have written, as well as most of his sermons, remained unpublished. See Granville Hicks, review of *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph L. Rusk, *Virginia Quarterly Review* 15, no. 4 (Autumn 1939). https://www.vqronline.org/emerson-letters (last accessed January 8, 2024).

[54] Stephen E. Whicher, *Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), 76. While Whicher is right to recognize *something* is different, certainly with respect to style, about the Emerson of the 1840s and beyond, I do not believe that, with respect to his fundamental metaphysical commitments, anything really changes. Thus, I quote feely from the whole of Emerson's *ouvre* in this document, something I would not be so cavalier about doing were the focus of this document on a different aspect of Emerson, say, on Emerson's politics.

[55] Now *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*.

[56] See George E. Carter, "Martin Luther King: Incipient Transcendentalist," *Phylon (1960-)* 40, no. 4 (1979): 318-324.

who might be more than a mere apologist for some naïve, retrograde and nationalistic form of liberal individualism.

This was the Emerson who first called out to me, primarily through the work of Stanley Cavell, who explicitly references Emerson to register his reservations about, among other things, the sort of political liberalism advanced by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Cavell began to think about the Emersonians at least as early as *Senses of Walden* (1972), but his reflections reached maturity in essays (themselves mostly versions of lectures delivered between 1983-88) collected in three books: *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (1988), *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (1989) and *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (1990).[57] Cavell uses Emerson to represent a tradition of "moral perfectionism" that contains ideas that, while indispensable to the formation and longevity of a truly just society, Rawls implicitly dismisses as elitist and incompatible with the principles upon which liberal democracy must be grounded.[58] Cavell is concerned fundamentally with the sense of compromise produced by the inevitable shortcomings of any actually existing liberal democracy. The Emersonians, he thinks, offer us the resources to cope with this gap between justice-in-theory and justice-in-practice—that is, with the tension between the pursuit of perfection within an imperfect world. Without the sense of agency that the Emersonians at least inspire, Cavell thinks, no forms of political unity or social solidarity based on consent can long endure.

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[57] Understanding Cavell, whose notoriously difficulty prose has been described as "labyrinthine" and "a misshapen, undisciplined amalgam of ill-sorted parts" in need of being "pruned of dead-wood and over-exuberant foliage," is no straightforward task. For an assortment of critical reactions to Cavell, see Richard Fleming, *The State of Philosophy: An Invitation to a Reading in Three Parts of Stanley Cavell's The Claim of Reason* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1993), 164-65.

[58] Some 'perfectionisms' Cavell agrees are overtly undemocratic. He qualifies the specific, democratic strain of perfectionism with which he is concerned as "Emersonian," "Nietzschean" or "moral" (all are basically synonymous). After Rawls' subsequent clarifications and modifications to his theory of justice, notably in the "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical" and "On the Idea of an Overlapping Consensus," it is not obvious that one cannot affirm something like Emersonian perfectionism within Rawls' framework for liberal democracy. See Paul Patton, "Cavell and Rawls on the Conversation of Justice: Moral Versus Political Perfectionism," *Journal of Cavellian Studies* 2 (2014): 54-74.

Emerson began to emerge in the 1990s as the figure that Cavell thought he was—to wit, someone who has something both philosophical and politically relevant to say.[59] George Kateb, like Cavell, has helped especially to reveal Emerson as "a thinker with the accuracy and consequentiality one expects of the major mind."[60] In two works, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (1992) and *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (1994), Kateb uses Emerson constructively as he lays out an alternative to the standard "Madisonian" defenses of liberal democracy. Such defenses begin with an admission that, while they indeed may do little to discourage our baser instincts and appetites, the arrangements of liberal democracy do a serviceable job of keeping them 'in check,' playing competing interests against each other such that the basic fabric of society is allowed to stretch but does not tear. Kateb would have us look instead toward the character traits that liberal democracy encourages rather than those that it discourages. He thinks that witnessing and participating in the ordinary practices of democratic life – such as voting in regular, contested elections or serving on a jury –not only 'chastens' political authority but actually "encourages individuals to be less fearful of all authority, whether concentrated in particular figures of authority or impersonally present in given rules or conventions." This freedom from fear makes it possible for "ways of being in the world" to emerge that collectively constitute a distinctively *democratic* individualism.[61] Among those who have something to say about this democratic individualism, Kateb believes Emerson to be "the best yet, the best by far."[62]

Nevertheless, in the same breath that he signals Emerson's genius, Kateb is at pains to deny that religion has any place in his own reflections upon these same traits of character and ways of being in the world about which Emerson otherwise so expertly speaks. "Religion," Kateb insists, "honestly does nothing to make the world more real," one implication being that, insofar as religion can 'make the world real,' it does so only in a dishonest way. Claiming "the

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[59] Major works on this theme include David Van Leer, *Emerson's Epistemology: The Argument of the Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). John Michael, *Emerson and Skepticism: The Cipher of the World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988). David Jacobson, *Emerson's Pragmatic Vision: The Dance of the Eye* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1993). David M. Robinson, *Emerson and The Conduct of Life: Pragmatism and Ethical Purpose in the Later Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Gustaaf Van Cromphout, *Emerson's Ethics* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999).

[60] Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 1.

[61] George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 39-44.

[62] Kateb, *The Inner Ocean*, 78.

burden of unreality" to be "democracy's heroism," religious commitment for Kateb figures to be not only intellectually dishonest; it is a coward's way out.[63]

Whereas for Kateb Emerson's religiousness is intellectually embarrassing, for Christopher Newfield it ultimately serves ideological ends. In *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America* (1996), Newfield contends that Emerson appeals to "coordinating higher law" in such a way that losing control over the powers that shape one's life comes to feel like freedom.[64] Or, said the other way around, he constitutes freedom in such a way that it becomes indistinguishable from submission or bondage to "a massive (yet benevolent) administrative power which is private and out of one's control."[65] While he eschews the Calvinistic God of his Puritan forefathers, Emerson ultimately prepares his reader to submit to an authority no less authoritarian for being "deglamourized."[66] In fact, insofar as the "loss of God" translates into "a gain for law," Emerson's "liberalization of Christianity," claims Newfield, "rests on his aversion to liberalizing the role of absolute law on human affairs."[67] This authoritarian presence of the law prevents freedom from being experienced in subversive, radically democratic ways.

Whereas Kateb is bullish on the prospect of severing religiousness from the Emersonian corpus and holding up the remainder as "the consummation of democratic individuality," Newfield is less optimistic. [68] For him, Emerson's religiousness is closer to what Kateb hopes it is not: "an insuperable obstacle" to enlisting Emerson in the project of fashioning an ethics adequate to the demands of modern democratic life.[69] For Newfield, Emerson introduces an unaccountable, more-than-human presence of authority that unacceptably compromises his otherwise admirable commitment to individual freedom. Because Newfield locates the source of Emerson's authoritarianism "not in his religiosity itself, but in the specific ways he describes religious or ontological law, and how he applies it to social and political questions," the trouble for him lies not so much with Emerson's *religiosity* as *Emerson's* religiosity.[70] We could, I

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[63] Kateb, *The Inner Ocean*, 35.
[64] Christopher Newfield, *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 30.
[65] Newfield, *The Emerson Effect*, 63
[66] Newfield, *The Emerson Effect*, 33
[67] Newfield, *The Emerson Effect*, 25
[68] Kateb, *The Inner Ocean*, 35.
[69] George Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995), 94.
[70] Newfield, *The Emerson Effect*, 25.

suppose Newfield might say, drain the religion out of Emerson, but that with which we would be left would not be something recognizably Emersonian; we would not, in other words, be talking about *Emerson* anymore.

The publication of the *Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson* from 1989 to 1992 made it possible, really for the first time, to consider religious imagination seriously in light of the most neglected aspect of Emerson's *ouvre*. While the sermons informed David Robinson's *Apostle of Culture: Emerson as Preacher and Lecturer* (1982) – which built upon the indispensable earlier work of contextualization carried out by Daniel Walker Howe in *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861* (1970), Scavan Bercovitch in *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975) and Catherine L. Albanese in *Corresponding Motion: Transcendental Religion and the New America* (1977) – Emerson's theology began to receive its due with the publication of Alan D. Hodder's *Emerson's Rhetoric of Revelation: Nature, the Reader, and the Apocalypse Within* (1989), Wesley T. Mott's *"The Strains of Eloquence": Emerson and His Sermons* (1989) and Susan L. Roberson's *Emerson in His Sermons: A Man-Made Self* (1995). Evelyn Barish's *Emerson: The Roots of Prophesy* (1989) and Phyllis Cole's *Mary Moody Emerson and the Origins of Transcendentalism* (1999) emphasize the contributions of Mary Moody Emerson, in particular, and New England Calvinism, in general, to Ralph Waldo's thought.

Both Gay Wilson Allen's *Waldo Emerson: A Biography* (1981) and Robert D. Richardson, Jr.'s *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (1995) make use of the wealth of material that had appeared since Rusk's biography to emphasize the continuity of Emerson's spiritual and intellectual growth. Their approach relies less on a notion of Whicherian 'crisis,' allowing us to encounter ideas in their nascent forms and then trace them as they mature in Emerson's mind. With this more organic Emerson in mind, Len Gougeon explored Emerson's involvement specifically in the antislavery movement in *Virtue's Hero* (1990) and, along with Joel Myerson, edited a 1995 volume of Emerson's antislavery writings. This work set the tone for much of the work on Emerson in the late 1990s through the 2000s. Sallee Fox Engstrom in *The Infinitude of the Private Man: Emerson's Presence in Western New York, 1851-1861* (1997) and Albert von Frank in *The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston* (1998) attend to Emerson's involvement in the antislavery movement, while Linck Johnson, Barbara Ryan and the contributors to the volume edited by T. Gregory Garvey entitled *The Emerson Dilemma:*

Essays on Emerson and Social Reform (2001) chronicle Emerson's engagement with the political movements of his age.

While 'my' Emerson was well formed by the time this dissertation commenced, a few 21st century works are worthy of note. They did less to inform my understanding of Emerson than confirm some of my instincts and hunches. Indeed, without them, I doubt that I would have had the fortitude to persist in my decidedly unfashionable inquiries. The contributors to the volume *The Other Emerson* (2010), edited by Branka Arsić and Cary Wolfe, did much to help confirm my suspicions that continental thought centered around the idea of 'subjectivity' has something—but not *everything* – to do with individualism as I understand it, as well as to help me break the habit of relying too exclusively on Cavell for my understanding of such ideas. In helping me to figure out what, exactly, these postmodern readings of Emerson were missing, few works have been as inspirational as Joseph Urbas's *Emerson's Metaphysics* (2016). Having encountered this work midway through this project, Urbas's convincing theses that 'causality' is at the heart of Emerson's philosophical and theological vision give me the courage to connect Emerson to Aquinas through their shared appreciation of law and causality. His recent publication of *The Philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (2021) has served only to cheer me onward. This is to say that I have come to appreciate that while Cavell and Kateb were indeed right to say that Emerson has something important and philosophical to say to us, it turns out that what he has to say to us is best appreciated through the lens of philosophical *theology*.

What lies ahead: Catholicism and the anonymous Emersonian

"Emerson," writes Harold Bloom, "by no means the greatest American writer, perhaps more an interior orator than a writer, is the inescapable theorist of virtually all subsequent American writing. From his moment to ours, American authors either are in his tradition, or else in a countertradition originating in opposition to him."[71] While we need not go quite as far as Bloom does here, his idea of an Emersonian tradition does carry weight, as does his reluctance to treat labels such as Transcendentalism, Idealism or Romanticism as sufficient to capture on their own the distinctiveness of the tradition associated with the name Emerson. Such labels do

[71] Harold Bloom, "Mr. America," review of *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Days of Encounter* by John McAleer. *New York Review of Books* 31, no. 18 (November 22, 1984).

capture something of Emerson's interests, to be sure, and can be helpful in helping us connect him to other strains of more 'established' criticism; however, they also tempt us to misrepresent or even dismiss him.

The Emersonians represent, in the words of Bloom, "our incessant effort to transcend the human without forsaking humanism." These efforts, considered together, form a tradition that amounts to nothing less than the basis of an American civil religion that serves as the backdrop against which the ardent atheist and most devout Christian alike must appear presentable to be taken seriously in the public sphere, whether they realize it or not. Although the Emersonians do not frame their reflections explicitly around the concept of vocation, they do concern themselves with adapting the forms of Christian life to take advantage of the newfound freedom and dynamism of their emerging democratic culture. To be sure, their adaptations can at times appear so creative and radical as to suggest utter disregard for tradition; and, at times, explicitly Christian motifs can be hard to find. Nevertheless, this should not lead us too quickly to conclude that they have abandoned the faith of their fathers. Their Christianity typically remains just beneath the surface, in the subtext and context of what they write, waiting to be recovered. I think their diagnoses and proposed therapies might well be worthy of examination, and I think that they are far more amenable to Catholic doctrines and sensibilities than they might appear to be at first glance.

One way of expressing what I am getting at is to say, alluding to Karl Rahner, that many Americans and those sympathetic to American ideals are 'anonymous Emersonians.' To this day, just about every American teenager reads (or at least is assigned to read) Emerson and Thoreau in secondary school. Their influence is ubiquitous; but, almost no one reads them as theologians. Rather, their 'religiousness' has been absorbed almost unconsciously. Unsurprisingly, then, Emersonian themes over time have been perhaps unwittingly incorporated into the worldview of American Catholics, and not all of these incorporations seem to me to have undermined their sense of Catholic identity. Far from it—most of the time, these anonymous Emersonians are some of the most energized and engaged Catholics around. I do not claim that Emerson is some sort of crypto-Catholic, but I am suggesting that Catholics would do well to appreciate at least as much as they find objectionable about Emerson and the Emersonian tradition (to be sure, there is plenty to which Catholics probably should object).

The main idea I am trying to get across is that individualism in its Emersonian inflection is actually a kind of 'vocationalism,' a neologism I would be inclined to invent if it were not so clunky and there were not good reasons for retaining the services of 'individualism' as a critical term. Among those reasons is that individualism is still a live, meaningful word in both scholarly and popular discourse, and so it holds out the promise of being useful inside and outside academia, as well as across academic disciplines. True, its use is certainly prone to misinterpretation, so we have to be careful. Emersonian individualism should not be mistaken for, on the one hand, a variety of what C.B. McPherson criticizes as 'possessive' individualism. Such is a shallow individualism, informed by the crudest moral psychologies and often unapologetically in the service of economic interests. Nor should Emersonian individualism be conflated with a kind of 'heroic' individualism associated with names like Byron and Nietzsche. Insofar as either of these forms of individualism can be said to have a teleology, in the former case it reduces to some sort of hedonism, while in the latter case it amounts to something like hero worship.[72] My mission in the upcoming chapters is to demonstrate how Emersonian individualism, properly understood, avoids these excesses and ultimately might be practiced *ad majorem Dei glorium*.

[72] SM 1:377-80. I would suggest, however, that Carlyle's 'hero-worship' is not what we have come to mean ordinarily by the term and is much closer to an Emersonian practice of 'using great men' for the purposes of self-development. Both terms are, for different reasons, 'problematic' given our current cultural milieu; but, the ideas they reference are, I think, valuable and relevant, and so part of what we are doing here is trying to come up with some new ways to refer to some old ideas, perhaps updating them for use in a more inclusive world in the process.

Chapter 2: The nature of vocation

Emerson's Roman epiphany

In March 1833, in the midst of what we might call his own vocational crisis – he had lost his wife, Ellen, to tuberculosis a year before, and he had just resigned his prestigious post as minister at the Second Church in Boston – Ralph Waldo Emerson did something that looks, on the face of it, astonishingly Catholic. He went to Rome. He dined with cardinals. He watched Pope Gregory XVI celebrate mass at St. Peter's Basilica; and, he did all this during Holy Week. On the Monday following Easter services, Emerson records in his journals:

> I love St. Peter's Church. It grieves me that after a few days I shall see it no more. It has a peculiar smell from the quantity of incense burned in it. The music that is heard in it is always good & the eye is always charmed. It is an ornament of the earth. It is not grand, it is so rich & pleasing; it should rather be called the sublime of the beautiful.[73]

These are not the recordings of an iconoclast or someone averse to the spectacle of Catholicism. In fact, beyond registering the ordinary inconveniences and complaints of travelers to this day – crowds, pickpockets, expenses, the weather – Emerson was not especially critical in his journals of what he found in Rome; in fact, much to his own surprise, Emerson regularly found himself positively energized by his encounters with the Catholic world.

This is somewhat remarkable given that this was a man raised in a culture in which anti-Catholic sentiment was *de rigueur* and who had recently in his resignation sermon questioned the validity and value of eucharistic celebration. Where we might expect him to scoff or take a superior tone, we instead find Emerson generally expressing admiration and delight. Typical are entries such as the ones following his visits to the Vatican museum:

> Go & see it, whoever you are. It is the wealth of the civilized world. It is a contribution from all ages & nations of what is most rich & rare. He who has not seen it does not know what beautiful stones there are in the planet, & much less

[73] JMN 4:157.

> what exquisite art has accomplished on their hard sides for Greek & Roman luxury.[74]
>
> How have all nations & ages contributed to the magnificence of the Vatican. If we could only know the history of each marble there, when, & by whom, & for whom it was carved; of what luxurious villa it formed an ornament, it would open to us the story of the whole world. [...] But now they amaze me & beget a vague curiosity which they cannot satisfy, nor can any living man.[75]

Following a recital of Gregorio Allegri's Miserere in St. Peter's, he records:

> [W]hat a temple! When the night was settling down upon it & a long religious procession moved through a part of the Church, I got an idea of its immensity such as I had not before. You walk about on its ample marble pavement as you would on a common, so free are you of your neighbors; & throngs of people are lost upon it. And what beautiful lights & shades on its mighty gilded arches & vaults & far windows & brave columns, & its rich clad priests, that look as if they were the pictures come down from the walls & walking. Thence we came out under the moon & saw the planet shine upon the finest fountain in the world, & upon all the stone saints on the piazza & the great church itself. This was a spectacle only Rome can boast- how faery beautiful! An Arabian night's tale.[76]

Emerson encounters a sensual faith in Rome, an orientation not especially encouraged by either his Calvinistic or liberal Christian formation.

With the assistance of sacred architecture throughout his Italian journey, Emerson experienced historical figures as somehow resurrected and present.

> When I walk up the piazza of Santa Croce I feel as if it were not a Florentine [nor a] European church but a church built by & for the human race. I feel equally at home within its walls as the Grand duke, so *hospitably* sound to me the names of its mighty dead. Buonaroti & Galileo lived for us all. As Don Ferrante says of Aristotle, *non e ne antico ne moderno, e il filosofo, senza piu.*[77]

Roman Catholicism presented a Christianity that incorporated the moral and aesthetic, and the past and present, in ways that Emerson found compelling and would seek to emulate in his subsequent work. Voices from the past, Christian and otherwise, called out to him, in vocational spaces and moments facilitated by the art and culture, if not the forms of worship, that the Catholic Church celebrated and made available to him.

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[74] JMN 4:150.
[75] JMN 4:158.
[76] JMN 4:155.
[77] JMN 4:175.

The eye of the Indian and the church of men to come

It is not as though Emerson was blind to the virtues of art and culture prior to his arrival in Rome. On the contrary, the Boston ministers, of whom Emerson was only recently considered an up-and-coming member, saw themselves playing a special role encouraging the development of high culture (to say nothing of protecting it from the corrupting influences of the "ignorant multitude"—especially, but not only, the Irish immigrants in the city's rapidly growing north end.)[78] Since the Boston churches were excluded from the provisions of Article Three of the Constitution of 1780 which provided for state support of Congregational ministers, Boston ministers depended almost entirely upon the support of their increasingly wealthy parishioners, most of whom responded poorly to preaching hell-fire and damnation – a long-time staple of the New England religion – and grew quickly impatient with theological hair-splitting. Instead, they expected sermons to have a literary quality and to be directed as much toward this world as the next.[79] Even more significantly, the rich did not want to be told that money is the root of all evil. The obvious problem was this: Christ was no businessman. He was also quite clear about the obstacles that riches pose to righteousness. To make business more 'Christ-friendly' the Boston ministers had to make some modifications to both the style and content of orthodox theology. So modify they did. Soon it was decadence and luxury – not wealth *per se* – that was subject to moral censure. One needed only to use one's wealth – spend money – in righteous ways in order to avoid God's wrath and, implicitly at least, to curry His favor.[80]

In Boston this meant giving to charities and especially patronizing the arts. Numerous libraries, Harvard Medical School, the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Lowell Institute and the Boston Athenaeum all came into being in the first decades of the 19th century, marking the beginning of the American philanthropic tradition.[81] Authors of the Monthly Anthology were quick to allude to the great figures of classical Greece and the Renaissance, all of whom relied on

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[78] Walter Muir Whitehall and Lawrence W. Kennedy, *Boston: A Topographical History*, 3d ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 111-12.
[79] Peter S. Field, *The Crisis of the Standing Order: Clerical Intellectuals and Cultural Authority in Massachusetts, 1780-1833* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 64-65.
[80] Field, *The Crisis of the Standing Order*, 75.
[81] Field, *The Crisis of the Standing Order*, 84-85.

the patronage of the wealthy. As Peter Field has noted: "While in the eighteenth century the intellectual elite largely believed that science and the arts supplemented religious studies, by the second decade of the nineteenth century their actions [...] suggest that they now believed them to supplant religion."[82]

That the creation and appreciation of art and culture in Emerson's Boston was generally an unapologetically exclusive and elite affair did not sit well with many of its proud, new republicans—it was, after all, the yeoman farmer to whom most Federalists and Jeffersonians alike turned for images of their model citizen. Responsible, industrious, frugal and economically independent, the 'gentleman' farmer could be counted on to be sufficiently disinterested so as to be able to genuinely consider the common good. Thus, it was difficult not to interpret any change from rural to urban, the simple and straightforward to the urbane, as anything other than decline and decadence. It is no accident that many of Boston's elite at this time anxiously began to dabble in horticulture and re-settle in country estates.[83]

Catholic Rome showed Emerson how art and culture might function differently, not only socially but in the economy of salvation. By this I do not mean, however, to suggest that Catholic*ism* wholly escaped Emerson's critical gaze. Following Palm Sunday service in the Sistine Chapel, Emerson records:

> All this pomp is conventional. It is imposing to those who know the customs of courts & of what wealth & of what rank these particular forms are the symbols. But to the eye of an Indian I am afraid it would be ridiculous. There is no true majesty in all this millinery & imbecility. Why not derive ceremonies that shall be in as good & manly taste as their churches & pictures & music?[84]

Even here, however, Emerson's critical gaze yields forward-looking, hopeful questions that pair well with thoughts recorded on his way to Rome following his visits to several cathedrals in Naples:

> Who can imagine the effect of a true & worthy form of worship in these godly piles? It would ravish us. I do not mean the common protestant service, but what it should be if all were actual worshippers. It would have something of this

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[82] Field, *The Crisis of the Standing Order*, 10.
[83] Tamara Plakins Thornton, *Cultivating Gentlemen: The Meaning of Country Life Among the Boston Elite 1785-1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 4-5.
[84] JMN 4:153.

> Catholic ceremony too & yet not show a priest trotting hither & thither, & buzzing now on this side then on that.[85]

This is to say that however critical Emerson may be of Catholic forms of worship, he is not *simply* so; rather, he is prepared to look beyond formalities toward the faith that the Roman Church inspires especially through its stewardship of art and culture.

What might such a form of worship look like? Here is a glimpse, articulated by Emerson in one of his more mature essays:

> There will be a new church founded on moral science, at first cold and naked, a babe in a manger again, the algebra and mathematics of ethical law, the church of men to come, without shawms, or psaltery, or sackbut; but it will have heaven and earth for its beams and rafters; science for symbol and illustration; it will fast enough gather beauty, music, picture, poetry. Was never stoicism so stern and exigent as this shall be. It shall send man home to his central solitude, shame these social, supplicating manners, and make him know that much of the time he must have himself to his friend. He shall expect no coöperation, he shall walk with no companion. The nameless Thought, the nameless Power, the superpersonal Heart,—he shall repose alone on that. He needs only his own verdict.[86]

There is much to unpack here, and after his Roman epiphany I do not think it is overstating things to say that Emerson's life mission—his vocation—might be understood as developing the kernels of these ideas into something resembling a theology for "the church of men to come." My question: What distance is between *this* church and the Church that was, in fact, called into being through Vatican II?

In what follows I intend my narrative presence to serve the role of friendly interlocutor, imagining what might have happened had Emerson been accompanied on his Italian journey by the likes of Orestes Brownson (with whom Emerson was, in fact, reasonably well acquainted) or John Henry Newman (of whom, as far as I know, Emerson was unaware), contemporaries who eventually did convert formally to the Catholic faith. Better, perhaps, to ask: What if Emerson were to have been accompanied on his Italian journey by the likes of Karl Rahner or Bernard Lonergan? For it is my contention that in wrestling especially with the ideas of Kant and the German Romantics, Emerson ends up anticipating some post-Conciliar themes especially as articulated by the Transcendental Thomists. Again, my goal is not to demonstrate Emerson's

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[85] JMN 4:144.
[86] *Worship*, E 1076.

'Catholicism' but rather to transpose Emersonian themes into a more Catholic key to see how far we might accommodate Emersonian individualism into a theology that is properly Catholic and vocational.

In this chapter, I offer what I think are reasonably mainstream 'takes' on a variety of fundamental ideas in Christian theology. I then relate Emerson to those ideas. That Emerson was a Christian is a biographical fact, but it is a fact to which he rarely draws much attention. Emerson does not write as a theologian or, for that matter, a philosopher, even as he references theologians and philosophers in his writing; and, he is not a system builder. So, in order to think systematically about Emerson's theology, we first need to build a modest theological system with reference to which we might situate Emerson. The purpose of this chapter is constructive. Themes and tensions will be introduced that will not be fully explored or resolved until later chapters. Think of it as an overture.

Although Rahner makes an occasional appearance, my perspective is not rooted in a particular Catholic theologian. My sources are fairly broad but inarguably Catholic— the Catechism, papal encyclicals and other documents of the Church. My point is not to say something too controversial or original. The theology is pedestrian and is intended to be so. Indeed, it *must* be so if it is to serve as I intend, as a point of contact and commonality upon which practitioners of latter-phase Receptive Ecumenism might eventually and productively engage.

Vocation and its appeals

Vocation, while always having been an important concept in Catholic theology, emerges after Vatican II with the potential to serve as a unifying term especially apt for our contemporary world in which one feels compelled, if not to condescend to, then at least to genuflect in the general direction of, the human subject. I take vocation to be the 'subject-side' of salvation (יְשׁוּעָה *y'shu'á*, σωτηρία *sōtēria*, *salvatio*), a topic alternately discussed under the headings of 'righteousness,' 'redemption' and 'forgiveness of sins,' or the more secular and political sounding 'liberation,' all of which are terms it might seem odd at first to associate with Emerson. Indeed, they are words he seldom uses; however, much like 'vocation,' salvation is a *concept* that captures much about which Emerson is *in other words* actually and deeply concerned; that

is, Emerson provides us with a rich phenomenology of salvation that might serve as the *explicandum* for which the vocabulary of Catholic theology might serve as the *explicans*.

On the one hand, salvation is an event, the paradigm of salvation being the Christ-event. Jesus is *Savior*, in whom the divine and human uniquely meet in history, the result being salvation in its objective sense. It is true that, with respect to salvation in its objective sense, Emerson is but mildly interested. His true interests lay rather with the way in which we experience that event and its implications here and now—that is, Emerson is concerned primarily with salvation as it comes to have a subjective sense, when it is no longer simply what *happened* but what *is happening.* Our salvation is effectively God's vocation, and we experience salvation, in part, as *our* vocation. Vocation is salvation embodied.

This is to say that running parallel to what is sometimes called 'salvation history' is 'vocation history,' or, rather, a series of 'vocation histories.' While these narratives of call and response are in some sense unique to each individual, they nevertheless share common elements and a common structure. In short, and in Christian shorthand, God calls everyone away from a life dominated by sin, toward a life illuminated by faith. This is a call for *conversion*—a self-transformation traditionally thought to be possible only by the grace of God.

These ideas—sin, faith, grace—are critical to the Christian imagination, forever yoked to salvation since St. Paul.

> The beginning of salvation is openness to something prior to ourselves, to a primordial gift that affirms life and sustains it in being. Only by being open to and acknowledging this gift can we be transformed, experience salvation and bear good fruit. Salvation by faith means recognizing the primacy of God's gift. As Saint Paul puts it: "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Eph 2:8).[87]

Our capacity to be open to the grace of God, let alone respond constructively to that grace through faith, is complicated by the existence of both sin, on the one hand, and freedom, on the other. This tension we experience as vocational *appeal*. We can appreciate this appeal under at least three aspects, depending on whether we concentrate on the one who is called, the one who calls or what is called for—vocation's accusative, vocative and dative aspects, respectively, or, in Aristotelian terms, the *pathos, ethos* and *logos* of vocation.

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[87] Cited in Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 19.

First of all, that we are beings capable of being addressed by God, that God in some important sense knows who we are *by name*, means that one should expect being called by God to be an intensely personal experience, one that may ultimately upset our ideas about who we think we are. We may very well find ourselves called to become someone else, offered new names after the fashion of Abraham and St. Paul. The *pathos* of God's appeal has to do with working out what it means to be a human person trusted to exercise freedom responsibly to God's greater glory. In being called, one is reminded of one's human dignity, to be sure; but, one is simultaneously made aware of the presence of sin, of the perfect dignity of the God I am not. The *pathos* of vocation is largely a sense of the tension here, between sin and the sense that I might be more than I presently am. The *pathos* of vocation is what being called *feels like*—more often than not the *pathos* of vocation is best described as a sort of restlessness.

Since it is God who ultimately calls us to act and to assume positions of agency *in his name*, God is always at least the implicit subject of any vocational claim. The *ethos* of God's call reveals the moral character of God, the nature of the authority of a God who calls (as opposed to, say, a God who is fundamentally commanding, vengeful, distant or indifferent). The *ethos* of vocation is the appeal of the merciful, graceful and loving way in which God wields power and exercises sovereignty. The way in which God calls us—the tone and timbre of God's voice, so to speak—marks the message as worthy of our attention.

Finally, it is also possible to see vocation from the point of view of what is *called for*, as the work that we are called to do in the name of God. In a vocational moment, one is called to judge whether what is being called for is reasonable, and therefore in a specific sense *necessary*, given what we know about who God is, who we are and how the world works. This judgement, combined with the action that follows from it, constitute our response—our call back—to God. This is to say that the *logos* of vocation is largely 'our call.' We are its arbiter or referee. Its appeal is to our sense of freedom. The *logos* of vocation is something that we must work out, in freedom, for ourselves.

It may seem odd to speak of the reasonableness of vocation since so many strange and unreasonable things seemingly have been called for by God. Worth remembering is that scenes such as the *Akedah* or St. Paul on the road to Damascus do not portray vocation in its ordinary sense. While we might be tempted to call them extraordinary vocational moments, such dramatic episodes should probably be set aside and considered under their own topic (perhaps theophany).

In such cases, when the authority and clarity of 'the call' are beyond reproach (to the point that the freedom to respond is in question), then we are not really talking about vocation anymore. Ordinarily, in vocational spaces we are less than certain that we are being called, about what we are being called to do or to be, and so our response to what we take to be a calling from God tends to be more tentative. In vocational moments, we ultimately encounter a reasonable God, one whose appeals register as more or less reasonable, neither squarely rational nor utterly irrational.

Sin and the *pathos* of vocation

What salvation saves us *from* is sin. Sometimes, we use 'sin' to refer to a transgressive desire—a desire to disobey God, other times to the transgression itself—the sinful act. Fundamentally, however, sin is a 'thing.' Sin is a thing that prevents us from successfully pursuing righteous things. There are four main metaphors, each with its own Biblical gravitas, to which the Church traditionally has appealed to help us understand what sin is and how it affects us.[88]

- Sin is a stain
- Sin is a weight
- Sin is a debt
- Sin is a disease

Rarely does one find these metaphors in isolation. They are commonly interwoven, mixed, and rightly so—sin is not exactly one or the other of these things. However, collectively these metaphors enable us to make some sense of a notoriously challenging topic. Keeping these metaphors in mind also will help attune our ear to moments where Emerson might be invoking the concept of sin without actually using that word.

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[88] With all things having to do with 'metaphor,' I am especially indebted to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. See their *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). See also George Lakoff, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) and Mark Johnson, *The Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

In cases where sin figures as a stain, the Hebrew noun translated as 'sin' is the same (עָוֹן, *'ăwōn*), but it is paired to a different verb (כִּבֵּס *kibbēs*, "wash away," as opposed to נָשָׂא *nāśā'*, "carry away") to indicate the nature of God's activity in relation to sin.[89] Whether God washes or carries it away, sin still figures to be an encumbrance, something that makes it difficult for us to act freely. In the former case, sin is something ugly or repellent that we are inclined to hide from others in shame. In the latter case, which is by far the most common way that the burdensomeness of sin is expressed in the Hebrew scriptures, sin figures as a weight that we cannot bear without hunching over, disfiguring ourselves in the process.

By the time of the Second Temple Period the metaphor 'sin is a weight' is depreciated in favor of 'sin is a debt.' This is less a replacement than a recasting of the 'sin is a weight' metaphor, as a debt is naturally understood as an economic burden. Anyone who has ever been in financial debt, especially one that seems impossible to repay, can appreciate how one might experience indebtedness as a 'weight' preventing one from 'getting on with one's life.' Furthermore, anyone who has received a 'weighty' medical diagnosis will certainly appreciate how the metaphor of weight is not far away from talk of illness or injury (just as surely as talk of debt will not be foreign to one who has had to shoulder the cost of medical treatment.) Illness, whether our own or that of someone whom we love, saps our strength, energy and agency. We feel as if we are weighted down. Similarly, an injury often prevents us from bearing the weight of our own bodies such that we experience ourselves as clumsy, burdened or lame.

Whatever we imagine sin to 'be,' the Church teaches that if left unaddressed, to sin we will find ourselves eventually shackled, imprisoned, held captive as by a ball and chain. In such a captive state, we are malnourished and grow weak. In captivity our relationship with God is strained. Our lines of communication with God seem broken. We are unable or at least unwilling to respond to God's calls, and we experience God as distant; we feel abandoned, alone, apart, isolated. This image, too, has deep biblical resonances: One thinks of the People of Israel exiled to Egypt and Babylon, far from their temple, surrounded by idols, tempted to infidelity. In both cases, the People of Israel understood (eventually, with the help of the prophets) their captivity as a just punishment for their wrongdoing, their exile as a sort of prison sentence that they

[89] While the metaphor 'sin is a weight' is the primary metaphor in the Old Testament, translators have almost never rendered the idiom *nāśā ăwōn* literally. See Gary A. Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 16-25.

deserved for failing to live up to the terms of the covenant into which they had entered with God. Similarly, the Church invites us as the People of God to imagine sin as something of which we are guilty; in fact, sin might be thought of as an objectification of guilt—the *culpa*.[90]

Emerson anticipates trends in contemporary theology that tend to shy away from the financial and legalistic interpretations of sin in favor of other metaphors, notably those of health and well-being. We are encouraged to imagine the captivity of sin more like that of a sickroom than a prison cell. This too is deeply biblical. Jesus was, after all, renowned in his time as a healer.

> Whilst a man seeks good ends, he is strong by the whole strength of nature. In so far as he roves from these ends, he bereaves himself of power, of auxiliaries; his being shrinks out of all remote channels, he becomes less and less, a mote, a point, until absolute badness is absolute death.[91]
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> The doctrine of the divine being forgotten; a sickness infects and dwarfs the constitution. Once man was all; now he is an appendage, a nuisance. […] Miracles, prophecy, poetry, the ideal life, the holy life, exist as ancient history merely; they are not in the belief, nor in the aspiration of society; but, when suggested, seem ridiculous.[92]
>
> That which shows God in me, fortifies me. That which shows God out of me, makes me a wart and a wen. There is no longer a necessary reason for my being. Already the long shadows of untimely oblivion creep over me, and I shall decease forever.[93]

What causes us to 'shrink,' 'dwarfs the constitution' and 'shows God out of me' is sin. Sin is, to hazard a paradox, a weighty absence—a lack of strength or vitality that once was or ideally ought to be present, a sense of relative diminution, that we are somehow less than we otherwise might be. Emerson thinks of sin as a lack of confidence that incapacitates, disables or otherwise unduly limits human agency. Sin is an encroachment, a cancerous 'no-thing' that stands in the place where the human agent ought to be.

It is characteristic of an Emersonian moral perspective to worry less about excessive self-interest than about placing too much weight on the interests and opinions of others. Sin is, for Emerson, other people. This is to say that the sort of sin with which Emerson is most concerned

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[90] SM 3:89-90.
[91] *Divinity School Address*, 8.
[92] *Divinity School Address*, 114.
[93] *Divinity School Address*, 116.

is a lack of individualism, a matter of taking on the weight of the "large society" beyond the "small society" one has "created for one's own use".[94]

> Whilst I do what is fit for me, and abstain from what is unfit, my neighbor and I shall often agree in our means, and work together for a time to one end. But whenever I find my dominion over myself not sufficient for me, and undertake the direction of him also, I overstep the truth, and come into false relations to him. I may have so much more skill or strength than he, that he cannot express adequately his sense of wrong, but it is a lie, and hurts like a lie both him and me. Love and nature cannot maintain the assumption: it must be executed by a practical lie, namely, by force. This undertaking for another, is the blunder which stands in colossal ugliness in the governments of the world.[95]

The agency of one whose cause has been 'taken up' by another is invariably compromised to some extent in Emerson's mind; but, such 'taking up' / 'taking under' is perhaps even more damaging to the undertakers themselves. As is often the case with Emerson, the word choice is no accident: We are dealing here with death and burial, with the weights of bodies and corpses. As undertakers or the undertaken, the stakes are high.

The deep psychological point to which Emerson would have us open our eyes is that we often justify the expansion of our circle of concern and our interventions in the lives of others, as well as their interventions in our own lives, in the name of a benevolent 'love;' that is, by appeal to what is good for them or us. This is especially easy to do when one is presented with evidence that oneself or another has failed to exercise agency in socially respectable ways. If those who run afoul of moral expectations are made to feel as though their own sense of agency is a weight they are unfit to bear, they might in good conscience be convinced that they should be relieved of it; but, Emerson believes, rarely is alleviating the perceived 'burden' of agency ultimately in anyone's best interest. The undertaken simply grow weaker, while in the case of the undertakers, Emerson suspects something more sinister is often at play.

Emerson is especially revealing when he speaks about slavery and the prospects of its abolition in his United States.

> We sometimes say, the planter does not want slaves, he only wants the immunities and the luxuries which the slaves yield him; give him money, give him a machine that will yield him as much money as the slaves, and he will

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[94] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition,* Vol. 3, Ch. 2., ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 2010), 882.
[95] *Politics*, E 566-7.

> thankfully let them go. He has no love of slavery, he wants luxury, and he will pay even this price of crime and danger for it. But I think experience does not warrant this favorable distinction, but shows the existence, beside the covetousness, of a bitterer element, the love of power, the voluptuousness of holding a human being in his absolute control.[96]

As far as Emerson is concerned, selfishness, greed and materialism are not the most significant threats to human agency. Far more dangerous—because it is so insidious—is that one's sense of agency either withers for having been undertaken by another or is corrupted into something dark as one grows comfortable in the role of undertaker. Shortly after returning from Europe in 1834, Emerson writes in his journals: "[T]he wise man must be wary of attaching followers. He must feel & teach that the best of wisdom cannot be communicated; must be acquired by every soul for itself."[97] Here, we catch a glimpse of what constitutes Emersonian sin at its most sinister. Failing to take responsibility for one's own condition is indeed sinful, but so too is failing to *refuse* responsibility for the condition of others beyond one's own 'small society.'[98]

This can start to sound perverse. It might seem that Emerson is incapable of advocating for a basic care and concern for anonymous others, much less something like Catholic *caritas*. I do not think that this is the case, but this challenge—that Emerson's individualism is incompatible with the degree of selflessness for which the Christian God calls – is one on which we will need to keep at least one eye peeled. The important point to register now is this: that we can *behave ourselves* Emerson presumes. Morality, as a set of practices that facilitate our treatment of one another with a degree of common decency, is salvation's *sine qua non,* and it is the easy part as far as Emerson is concerned.[99] He is far more concerned with the consequences of sin upon the actions that we do *not* take, from what we *fail* to do out of despair, fear or a general lack of imagination. Emerson is less concerned with the abusive excesses of human agency (say, by the careless exercise of one's freedom) than he is with acquiescence or quietism in the face of human authority. He worries that, held captive by sin, human beings cannot but incline toward something even worse than ordinary immorality—we risk falling into a

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[96] *Address Delivered in the Court-House in Concord on the Anniversary of the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies, August 1, 1844*, 274.
[97] JMN 4:279.
[98] Emerson anticipates Freud here, and Nietzsche, and to an extent recalls DeSade.
[99] CS 3:63 (Sermon 100): "The law of Christ alone is accurately consistent with the moral Constitution of man."

submissive, obedient state he calls "mediocrity," qualified variously by Emerson as "tame and timid," "hopeless" and "smooth."[100]

Emerson worries that we habitually sell ourselves short, so to speak, and in doing so cheat God. The issue is less that we owe a debt to God than that God is an investor whom we might disappoint with our returns. This is to say that Emerson is concerned more with the guilt of moral *imperfection* than moral *transgression*, with sins of omission than with sins of commission. In fact, he worries that an obsessive focus on the latter might overshadow the moral resources that are actually at the disposal of the human agent, to the point even of leading one to deny human agency any constructive role in salvation. We risk falling into such a world as sin forecloses on the robust sense of moral agency—the "vigor of wild virtue" – that would indicate the presence of the divine, "the indwelling Supreme Spirit," ignorance of which amounts to so much listlessness, weakness and death.[101]

We will come back to this. For now, let us shift our attention from the sickness to its cure. For Emerson, like so many Christians of various stripes that came before him, what unburdens, redeems, purifies and heals such that salvation might take root in us is, in a word, faith.

Grace and the *ethos* of vocation

Faith (πίστις, *pistis, fides*) is the *how* of salvation. It is what "throws a new light on everything, manifests God's design for man's total vocation."[102] 'Faith is light' is one of two main metaphors that the Church uses to explore what faith 'is' and what it 'is like' to have.

> Faith, received from God as a supernatural gift, becomes a light for our way, guiding our journey through time. On the one hand, it is a light coming from the past, the light of the foundational memory of the life of Jesus which revealed his perfectly trustworthy love, a love capable of triumphing over death. Yet since

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[100] *The Uses of Natural History*, 26; *Divinity School Address*, 123; *Self-Reliance*, 35.
[101] 'Vigor' is from *Self-Reliance,* 147; 'Indwelling' is from *Divinity School Address*, 114. For purposes of this inquiry, human and moral agency are equivalent terms, but not because I believe there is no such thing as non-moral human agency. We encounter it all the time, notably in children and youth who have yet to develop fully a sense of moral agency. The sense of agency with which I am concerned is that of a mature human agent, and I presume that part of what it means to be mature is to be moral. Moral agency thus indicates the highest form of human agency, the sense of agency most worth having.
[102] GS 11.

> Christ has risen and draws us beyond death, faith is also a light coming from the future and opening before us vast horizons which guide us beyond our isolated selves towards the breadth of communion. We come to see that faith does not dwell in shadow and gloom; it is a light for our darkness.[103]

In addition to the 'faith is light' motif, the author of Luke-Acts depicts faith as a door (Acts 14:27), an image Benedict XVI conjures in *Porto Fidei* while discussing Augustine's appropriation of the metaphor.[104] In this image, our 'freedom' lies on the other side of a door that requires faith to open. Technically, faith is less the door itself than whatever it takes to open the door. If the door is locked, faith is synecdochically the key. If the door is barred or blocked – say, by sin – then faith is the strength to bash it open.

Whereas sin is associated with captivity and darkness, faith is associated with openness and light. Whereas sin encumbers, faith enables. Faith is less an inanimate 'thing' like sin than a capacity or power in its own right. It might seem that, if faith is opposed to sin, and sin is associated in the Emersonian mind with an absence of individualism, then faith must correlate with the presence of a strong sense of personal agency. To an extent, this is true; but, it is a somewhat misleading way of putting things, for the concept of faith introduces not only human agency but also divine power into the picture. It is a fundamental conceit of Christianity that one needs help—God's help—to generate the faith one needs in order to gain any lasting advantage over sin. Faith is not a disposition that we can cultivate and maintain by sheer force of will alone. The usual Christian way of putting things is that faith relies upon (when it is not utterly identified with) the grace of God.

Grace is the usual translation of the Greek *charis* (significantly the root of *eucharistia*), the use of which in the Pauline epistles and Luke-Acts serves to remind us that faith, and through it, salvation, involves reconciling two apparently contradictory thoughts. Faith is something importantly out of our control; but, at the same time, it is not something to which we might remain *utterly* passive. Because in ordinary Greek the term *charis* applies to both sides of a gift transaction, we can speak of giving a gift as a bestowal of grace upon the recipient of that gift; but, we can also say that the reception of a gift calls for an exhibition of grace by the recipient toward the giver of the gift.[105] If salvation is God's gift to us, then faith is what is called for in

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[103] Francis, *Lumen Fidei,* 4.
[104] Benedict XVI, *Porto Fidei,* 7.
[105] SM 2:410.

return, “the acknowledgment of a primordial and radical gift which upholds our lives.”[106] In English, we tend to reserve the word 'grace' to refer to the character of the one who gives and 'gratitude' to refer to the attitude of the one who receives a gift—in other words, to receive a gift gracefully is to express gratitude for it being given. When applied to faith, the language of grace invites us to consider that our capacity to be addressed by God and to receive divine communication merits from us the same sort of gratitude expected of anyone who has received a valuable gift.[107]

Even in our contemporary world, gratitude is thought to be the very least one who has given a gift can expect to receive from the one to whom the gift was given. In the ancient world, gifts were given with much stronger expectations of return.[108] Families, tribes and other groups were bound together, in part, by the obligations generated through the giving and receiving of gifts. Failing to offer a gift would have been less a sign of rudeness than of outright hostility, just as failing to express gratitude appropriately would have been a grave insult. This is the cultural background against which Jesus taught his disciples to put loyalty to him even above gratitude toward one’s parents and proclaimed a kingdom where all debts are forgiven, including debts of gratitude. It is no wonder that his views were viewed by many with hostility— they threatened to unravel the very fabric of society.

Paul follows Jesus in teaching that the tight circles of reciprocal obligations that emerge through the giving and receiving of gifts tend to constrict the scope of our concerns. At the very least, the usual gift-giving economy amounts to a distraction that threatens to diminish our sense of gratitude toward God, the ultimate source of all gifts. Just as our jealousies, hurts and anger must be transcended before they become all-consuming – a teaching Jesus embodies on the cross — so too on the positive side of things we might experience the demands of gratitude as constraining to the point of captivity, at which point our sense of gratitude might weirdly become for us a source of sin. The deleterious effects of these sorts of overwhelming social obligations Emerson saw especially clearly: “When I receive a new gift, I do not macerate my body to make the account square, for, if I should die, I could not make the account square. The benefit overran

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[106] Francis, *Lumen Fidei* 19.
[107] In contemporary (Rahnerian) theological language, grace is “the self-communication of the absolute God to his creature” (SM 2:422). What I am calling ‘vocation,’ then, is a *kind* of grace, from this point of view.
[108] See John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015) and Peter J. Leithart, *Gratitude: An Intellectual History* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014).

the merit the first day, and has overran the merit ever since. The merit itself, so-called, I reckon part of the receiving."[109]

Emerson follows Jesus and Paul in seeking to free people from such captivity by imagining gratitude less as a matter of returning a favor, more or less in kind, than of properly using a gift received to the greater glory of God, regardless of whom the beneficiary of the use of that gift might be, whether that benefit is merited or not. To be sure, they do not discourage the expression of gratitude directly to God through prayer and worship; but, they also call us to express gratitude indirectly through the use of our gifts. In gratitude for the gift of faith, we are called to put our faith to work in the world.

Emerson's sense of what the work one is called to do in the world might look like goes beyond what is ordinarily captured by words like 'morality' or 'social justice.' For Emerson, in the light of faith we see the world as actually and potentially 'good' in not only a moral but also an aesthetic sense. "Beauty is the form under which the intellect prefers to study the world."[110] By his reckoning, this is ultimately how Christ saw the world and God sees the world. Seeing human creatures this way—as beautiful and worthy of love—inspires faith that in some respects allows us to mimic the creative power of God himself.

> A true conversion, a true Christ, is now, as always, to be made, by the reception of beautiful sentiments. It is true that a great and rich soul, like his, falling among the simple, does so preponderate, that, as his did, it names the world. The world seems to them to exist for him, and they have not yet drunk so deeply of his sense, as to see that only by coming again to themselves, or to God in themselves, can they grow forevermore. It is a low benefit to give me something; it is a high benefit to enable me to do somewhat of myself.[111]

Through the inspiration of faith, we approximate, however modestly, God's own facility to 'name the world,' a reference to God's invitation to humanity to share in the original creative process through the naming of the animals (Gen. 2:19). This is to say that through faith we begin to experience the world not only as made *for* us but, in a sense, made *by* us.

> As the world was plastic and fluid in the hands of God, so it is ever to so much of his attributes as we bring to it. To ignorance and sin, it is flint. They adapt themselves to it as they may; but in proportion as a man has anything in him

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[109] *Experience*, 244.
[110] *Beauty,* E, 1102.
[111] *Divinity School Address,* 116.

> divine, the firmament flows before him and takes his signet and form. Not he is great who can alter matter, but he who can alter my state of mind. They are the kings of the world who give the color of their present thought to all nature and all art, and persuade men by the cheerful serenity of their carrying the matter, that this thing which they do, is the apple which the ages have desired to pluck, now at last ripe, and inviting nations to the harvest.[112]

Even if we do not understand exactly how, we have nevertheless called the world into being and participate in "the continuation of the divine effort that built the man."[113] To be sure, the world is mysterious, but faith that its mysteries might not be utterly impenetrable is warranted, if for no other reason than it is a world we have helped to 'write.'

Taken too far, this sort of talk can begin to sound hubristic, other than Christian and even downright heretical, something Emerson's reference to the 'apple' of original sin is surely intended to register. But how far is too far? There are two boundary markers to which the Church would have us heed:

> A new form of Pelagianism is spreading in our days, one in which the individual, understood to be radically autonomous, presumes to save oneself, without recognizing that, at the deepest level of being, he or she derives from God and from others. According to this way of thinking, salvation depends on the strength of the individual or on purely human structures, which are incapable of welcoming the newness of the Spirit of God. On the other hand, a new form of Gnosticism puts forward a model of salvation that is merely interior, closed off in its own subjectivism. In this model, salvation consists in elevating oneself with the intellect beyond "the flesh of Jesus towards the mysteries of the unknown divinity." It thus presumes to liberate the human person from the body and from the material universe, in which traces of the provident hand of the Creator are no longer found, but only a reality deprived of meaning, foreign to the fundamental identity of the person, and easily manipulated by the interests of man.[114]

Thus, the Church teaches that two of the most ancient heresies are also among the most persistent. Emerson would have us tread close to the boundaries of each, uncomfortably so, I would suspect, for many Catholics. Taking Emerson seriously from a Catholic perspective involves turning toward ideas from which we must ultimately, but not prematurely, turn away.

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[112] *American Scholar*, 102-3.
[113] *Natural History of the Intellect*, W 12:55
[114] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter *Placuit Deo* to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Certain Aspects of Christian Salvation (2018). This letter uses the same diagnostic categories (Pelagianism, Gnosticism) as Francis does in *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Lumen Fidei*.

At some point, to remain Catholic, if not Christian altogether, one must turn away from Pelagian temptations to reduce salvation to a program of self-aggrandizement, just as one must turn toward the material world before one's faith becomes utterly 'spiritualized.' Knowing exactly when and how to execute these turns is a matter of discerning the *logos* of vocation.

Freedom and the *logos* of vocation

A Christian vocation must be rooted in grace, but in a way that is compatible, somehow, with freedom. We must be free, in some sense, to be grateful just as God must be free, perhaps in a different sense, to be graceful. Otherwise, we have merely traded the bondage of sin for some other form of bondage.

> Vocation is neither a pre-composed script that the human being has simply to recite nor is it an unwritten theatrical improvisation. Since God calls us to be friends and not servants (cf. Jn 15:13), our choices make a real contribution to the historical unfolding of his loving plan. The economy of salvation, on the other hand, is a Mystery that infinitely surpasses us; hence only through listening to the Lord do we learn what part we are called to play in it. Understood in this light, vocation appears as a real gift of grace and a gift of covenant – the most beautiful and precious secret of our freedom.[115]

Without freedom, the relationship between God and humankind might too much resemble that of a puppeteer and puppet; but, without grace, that same freedom threatens to run off the rails and become the source of so much sin. God's grace and freedom must somehow cooperate in the economy of salvation—this the Church unwaveringly affirms. But it does not explain how, exactly, one can affirm such cooperation without making God responsible for 'causing' sin, or at least for allowing sin, which would seem to compromise God's *ethos* as a perfectly beneficent, omnipotent and omniscient being. Either we take freedom seriously, or we take grace seriously; we cannot, so it would seem, have it both ways.

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[115] XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Final Document "Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment" (27 October 2018). https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20181027_doc-final-instrumentum-xvassemblea-giovani_en.html (last accessed May 30, 2023).

So long as one steers clear of affirming the idea of unconditional election or that some are predestined to damnation, the Church permits a range of resolutions to this perennial challenge.[116] With respect to freedom, the *locus classicus* is the position of Thomas Aquinas.

> Man has free-will: otherwise counsels, exhortations, commands, prohibitions, rewards, and punishments would be in vain. In order to make this evident, we must observe that some things act without judgment; as a stone moves downwards; and in like manner all things which lack knowledge. And some act from judgment, but not a free judgment; as brute animals. For the sheep, seeing the wolf, judges it a thing to be shunned, from a natural and not a free judgment, because it judges, not from reason, but from natural instinct. And the same thing is to be said of any judgment of brute animals. But man acts from judgment, because by his apprehensive power he judges that something should be avoided or sought. But because this judgment, in the case of some particular act, is not from a natural instinct, but from some act of comparison in the reason, therefore he acts from free judgment and retains the power of being inclined to various things.[117]

In genuine vocational moments, God calls one to "act from judgement." One is left to work out for oneself the *logos* of what is being called for by God. For Aquinas, this means assessing whether one has a good reason to believe that an act advances *eudaimonia*, usually translated as 'happiness,' although almost everyone agrees inadequately so. For one thing, we are inclined to speak of happiness as a temporary, subjective phenomenon. We speak of being happy in some moments of our lives and unhappy in others; and, no one is in a position to contradict me if I claim that I am happy. Happiness is often thought to be a feeling, one that is basically pleasurable—a matter of feeling good about one's life. But happiness to the ancients was a quality of one's life taken as a whole, so much so that Solon's "call no man happy until he is dead" figured to be, for Aristotle, common sense. A happy life for Aristotle and the ancients more generally was *teleion*. Literally, *teleion* means simply 'end-like,' but it connotes

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[116] When God "establishes his eternal plan of 'predestination,' he includes in it each person's free response to his grace" (CCC 600). "God predestines no one to go to hell; for this, a willful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end" (CCC 1037).

[117] ST I, q. 83 a. 1 co. "Respondeo dicendum quod homo est liberi arbitrii, alioquin frustra essent consilia, exhortationes, praecepta, prohibitiones, praemia et poenae. Ad cuius evidentiam, considerandum est quod quaedam agunt absque iudicio, sicut lapis movetur deorsum; et similiter omnia cognitione carentia. Quaedam autem agunt iudicio, sed non libero; sicut animalia bruta. Iudicat enim ovis videns lupum, eum esse fugiendum, naturali iudicio, et non libero, quia non ex collatione, sed ex naturali instinctu hoc iudicat. Et simile est de quolibet iudicio brutorum animalium. Sed homo agit iudicio, quia per vim cognoscitivam iudicat aliquid esse fugiendum vel prosequendum. Sed quia iudicium istud non est ex naturali instinctu in particulari operabili, sed ex collatione quadam rationis; ideo agit libero iudicio, potens in diversa ferri."

completion, finality or perfection, giving ancient invocations of happiness their 'spiritual' resonance. Consider that even Aristotle treats the term *makariotes*—commonly translated as 'blessedness' (*beatitudo* in Latin)—as a synonym for *eudaimonia*.

In accord with the ancient tradition, Aquinas viewed happiness according to a "twofold aspect" (*duplex est*).[118] On the one hand, perfect happiness (*beatitudo*) is impossible to attain by our own efforts and is, in this sense, unnatural to us. It is, rather, supernatural, available only within the order of grace. However, a genuine, albeit imperfect, happiness (*felicitas*) can be had unapologetically in this life. Such happiness, available to us to a degree even without a sense of grace, is not nothing; but, it is far less than that for which we might hope.

Happiness, then, from a Thomistic point of view, is the penultimate *what for* of salvation: We are saved from sin so that we might, through faith, be happy, and happy to some meaningful degree in this life. While Aquinas conceived of nature and grace as distinct orders of being, he did not posit an unbreachable wall between them. An infusion of grace might elevate human nature, a position the Church continues to uphold.

> According to the perspective of St. Thomas, the great theologian also described as *Doctor humanitatis,* human nature is in itself open and good. Man is naturally *capax Dei* (fit to receive God) (Summa Theologiae, I, II, 113, 10; St Augustine, De Trinit. XIV, 8; PL 42, 1044), created to live in communion with his Creator; he is a free and intelligent individual, integrated in the community with his own duties and rights; he is the connecting link between the two great spheres of reality, the material and the spiritual, and fully belongs to both. The soul is the unifying part of the person's being and makes him a person. In man, St Thomas observes, grace does not destroy nature but fulfills its potential: "*gratia non tollit naturam, sed perficit*" (Summa Theologiae, I, I, 8 ad 2).[119]

By God's grace, then, one might orient oneself toward supernatural (spiritual) ends and thereby 'participate' to some extent in the divine life while still remaining within the natural (material)

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[118] ST I-II, q. 4 a. 5 co. "Respondeo dicendum quod duplex est beatitudo, una imperfecta, quae habetur in hac vita; et alia perfecta, quae in Dei visione consistit." (I answer that, Happiness is twofold: the one is imperfect and is had in this life; the other is perfect, consisting in the vision of God)."

[119] Message of His Holiness John Paul II to the Participants in the International Thomistic Congress on "Christian Humanism in the Third Millennium" (2003), 2. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2003/september/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20030929_congresso-tomista.html (last accessed May 30, 2023).

order.[120] Within a Thomistic framework, it is perfectly acceptable to speak of "natural," "material" or "created" gifts coexisting alongside "supernatural," "spiritual" or "uncreated" gifts accessible exclusively through faith. Grace is not opposed to nature but to sin, and sin is whatever distracts from one's pursuit of supernatural ends—it is itself not supernatural, nor is it natural; sin is properly unnatural, having no distinct order of its own.

Aquinas is largely responsible for providing the scaffolding that would allow generations of Christians after him to think optimistically about their human condition. A Thomistic moral imagination rests on the assumption that at least the highest human aspirations could not possibly be contrary to God's plan for the salvation of humankind.[121] In fact, the order of nature conspires with the order of grace in the interest of salvation. Because it is my contention that Emerson's dynamics of faith and sin are more at home in the world of Aquinas than of Luther and Calvin, let us briefly examine Emerson's intellectual inheritance so that we can better appreciate what fog his Roman epiphany allowed him, however briefly, to see *through*.

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[120] ST I-II, q. 110 a. 2 ad 2 *"Id enim quod substantialiter est in Deo, accidentaliter fit in anima participante divinam bonitatem, ut de scientia patet. Secundum hoc ergo, quia anima imperfecte participat divinam bonitatem, ipsa participatio divinae bonitatis quae est gratia, imperfectiori modo habet esse in anima quam anima in seipsa subsistat* (Now what is substantially in God, becomes accidental in the soul participating the Divine goodness, as is clear in the case of knowledge. And thus because the soul participates in the Divine goodness imperfectly, the participation of the Divine goodness, which is grace, has its being in the soul in a less perfect way than the soul subsists in itself)."

[121] "[A] natural desire cannot be in vain." *Compendium Theologiae*, I, 104. Trans. Richard J. Regan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 85.

Chapter 3: The Platonic metaphysics of vocation

Emerson's Parisian epiphany

In Emerson scholarship, what I am calling Emerson's Roman epiphany is overshadowed by a subsequent epiphany of sorts that followed upon his visit in the summer of 1833 to the *Museum d'Histoire Naturelle* in Paris.[122] Emerson famously summarizes the impact of the experience in *The Uses of Natural History* some years later:

> The eye is satisfied with seeing and strange thoughts are stirred as you see more surprizing objects than were known to exist; transparent lumps of amber with gnats and flies within; radiant spars and marbles; huge blocks of quartz; native gold in all its forms of crystallization and combination, gold in threads, in plates, in crystals, in dust; and silver taken from the earth molten as from fire. You are impressed with the inexhaustible gigantic riches of nature. The limits of the possible are enlarged, and the real is stranger than the imaginary. The universe is a more amazing puzzle than ever, as you look along this bewildering series of animated forms, the hazy butterflies, the carved shells, the birds, beasts, insects, snakes, fish, and the upheaving principle of life everywhere incipient, in the very rock aping organized forms. Whilst I stand there I am impressed with a singular conviction that not a form so grotesque, so savage, or so beautiful, but is an expression of something in man the observer. We feel that there is an occult relation between the very worm, the crawling scorpions, and man. I am moved by strange sympathies. I say I will listen to this invitation. I will be a Naturalist.[123]

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[122] For discussions of Emerson's visit to the *Museum d'Histoire Naturelle* and its impact, see David M. Robinson, "Emerson's Natural Theology and the Paris Naturalists: Toward a 'Theory of Animated Nature,'" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 41 (1980): 69-88. Elizabeth A. Dant, "Composing the World: Emerson and the Cabinet of Natural History," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 44 (June 1989), 18-44. Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 139-42. Lee Rust Brown, *The Emerson Museum: Practical Romanticism and the Pursuit of the Whole* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). Laura Dassow Walls, *Emerson's Life in Science: The Culture of Truth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003). See also Suszanna C. Harvey, "Reading the 'Book of Nature': Emerson, the Hunterian Museum and Transatlantic Science," *The Edinburgh Companion to Atlantic Literary Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 325-339. Harvey makes a compelling case that, in the long run, Emerson's subsequent visit to the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons in London is the most formative of Emerson's museum experiences.

[123] *The Uses of Natural History*, 15. The basis of this passage is his journal entry from 1833 (J 4:199-200): "Here we are impressed with the inexhaustible riches of nature. The Universe is a more amazing puzzle than ever as you glance along this bewildering series of animated forms, - the hazy butterflies, the carved shells, the birds, beasts, fishes, insects, snakes, - & the upheaving principle of life everywhere incipient in the very rock aping organized

Much is rightly made of this passage, a record of what we might call Emerson's 'Parisian' epiphany; however, when Paris is read in the light of Rome, we can begin to see them as two halves of a whole. My take is that, in Rome, Emerson confronted the poverty of his religious imagination, finding himself overwhelmed by the sheer volume of divine self-communication disclosed through art and culture. Walking among the exhibits of the *Museum*, with his Roman experience freshly in mind, Emerson discerned an organizing principle that promised to bring his 'Roman' experience of art and culture—the products of human history—into accord with the "strange sympathies" he experienced as he gazed upon the products of non-human creation as exhibited in the cabinets of the *Museum*. Paris does not supersede Rome; it completes it. His Parisian epiphany does not so much incline him toward science, away from religion, so much as it leads him to consider natural theology as a framework for natural philosophy. He is moved, in short, in the direction of metaphysics.

Writing almost a year after his Parisian epiphany, Emerson elaborates on what, to him, being a naturalist entails:

> It seems the duty of the Naturalist to study in faith and in love, never to lose sight of the simplest questions, "Why?" and "Whence?" and 'What of that?", to be a poet in his severest analysis; rather, I should say, to make the Naturalist subordinate to the Man. He only can derive all the advantage from intimate knowledge who forces the magnified objects back into their true perspective, who after he has searched the proximate atoms integrates them again as in nature they are integrated and keeps his mind open to their beauty and to the moral impressions which it is their highest office to convey. To him they suggest a feeling as grand as the knowledge is accurate. To this end of furnishing us with hints, intimations of the inward Law of Nature, a cabinet is useful. […] [N]o intelligent person can come into a well-arranged cabinet of natural productions without being excited to unusual reveries, without being conscious by instinctive perception of relations which he can only feel without being able to comprehend or define.[124]

After Paris, Emerson begins to understand his vocation as a sort of finishing carpenter (an auspicious vocation for any Christian…), his essays and lectures as so much cabinetry serving a purpose roughly opposite to that of a coffin—to exhibit aspects of the created world such that

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forms. Not a form so grotesque, so savage, nor so beautiful but is an expression of some property inherent in man the observer, -and occult relation between the very scorpions and man. I feel the centipede in me- cayman, carp eagle & fox. I am moved by strange sympathies, I say continually 'I will be a naturalist.'"

[124] *The Naturalist*, EL 1:81-2. Originally presented as "Address to the Boston Natural History Society on their fourth Annual Meeting, 7 May, 1834."

what seems dead and inanimate might effectively 'come to life' and call out to us in compelling ways.

To be a naturalist for Emerson is not to bracket or abandon inquiry into something called the *super*natural. Far from it. Emerson is no materialist. He remains a fundamentally metaphysical thinker before and after Paris; nevertheless, Emerson spares little enthusiasm for metaphysical speculation when it is ungrounded, utterly detached from inquiry into the material world. What changes after Paris is his sense of attachment and belonging to the world in its totality, that grace might not be competing but rather cooperating with nature in the interest of salvation. After Paris, Emerson's attention shifts to exploring how the natural and supernatural, the physical and metaphysical, and even, to some degree, creature and Creator, might be bound together and intrinsically *one*.

My suggestion is that Emerson registers the impact of the Parisian epiphany by saying "I will be a Naturalist" because, estranged from scholasticism by his Protestant formation, he cannot say "I will be a Thomist." I mean this in a weak, suggestive sense, that for Emerson, as for Aquinas, the natural, created world which our senses disclose to us and of which we seem ourselves to be at least a part, is a valid and promising starting-point for theological inquiry. It is crucial, I think, to appreciate the extent to which Emerson, like Aquinas, sees grace and nature as distinct but *complementary* orders of being (the former uncreated and *of* God, the latter created *by* God) and faith and knowledge "like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth."[125] A more colorful way of stating my proposal is that Catholics might profitably hear much of what Emerson has to say as Thomas might, which is to say, borrowing a lovely phrase from John Paul II, as "a chant in praise of what exists."[126]

Obscuring the common ground on which Emerson and Thomas stand is the fact that, exposed as he was to the latest intellectual trends coming out of Germany, Emerson was practically obliged to express himself in terms of art established by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant ultimately did not see himself as continuing so much as breaking with the scholastic tradition. He was not especially interested in translating his philosophical vocabulary into terms

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[125] John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, 1.
[126] John Paul II, *Angelicum Address* (November 17, 1979). *L'Osservatore Romano*, English Weekly Edition (December 17, 1979) 6-8. http://aquinasactusessendi.blogspot.com/2010/03/angelicum-address_15.html (last accessed May 3, 2023).

that would be recognized readily by those who came before him. Even though Emerson, so far as we know, did not read Kant directly, it is a mistake to underestimate Kant's influence on him, or to conclude too quickly that his understanding of Kant was somehow second-rate. For one thing, Emerson's circle of confidants included Frederic Henry Hedge (1805-90), who would become professor of German literature at Harvard. Hedge certainly knew his Kant and was in a position to set Emerson straight were he to drift too far off the mark.[127] Moreover, the summaries of Kant offered by the likes of Joseph-Marie Degérando (1772-1842) and Victor Cousin (1792-1867) in their surveys of the history of philosophy have been reassessed as more informed than previously thought.[128]

What is undeniable is that Emerson's Kant came bundled together and sometimes conflated with post-Kantian ideas that had gained currency at the turn of the 19th century in the cities of Jena and Berlin, ideas that Samuel Taylor Coleridge, along with William Wordsworth and Thomas Carlyle—all of whom Emerson will meet in the months following his Roman and Parisian epiphanies before heading home in the autumn of 1833—are largely responsible for introducing into English, generally, and to Emerson, in particular.[129] Cultivated by the likes of August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767-1845), Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Novalis (1772-1801), Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) and Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854), these ideas have collectively come to be associated with early German Romanticism (*Frühromantik*). The *früh Romantiker* – at least some of them – interpreted Kant as more continuous with certain threads of the scholastic tradition than Kant himself cared to recognize.

Attempting to connect Emerson to Catholic thought *through* Kant and the Romantics might seem, *prima facie*, odd, if not utterly misguided. After all, the Catholic magisterium has been wary of Kant and his transcendental methods more broadly as pathways to heresy and atheism at least since the promulgation of the *Syllabus Errorum* (1864). Nevertheless, grounded upon the neo-scholasticism of Désiré-Joseph Cardinal Mercier (1851-1926) and Maurice Blondel

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[127] On Hedge's influence, see Samantha C. Harvey, *Transatlantic Transcendentalism: Coleridge, Emerson and Nature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 22-39.
[128] See Joseph Urbas, "In Praise of Second-Rate French Philosophy: Reassessing Victor Cousin's Contribution to Transcendentalism," *Revue Française d'études Américaines* no. 140 (2014): 37-51.
[129] JMN 5:70. An entry in Emerson's Journals for August 20, 1837, eleven days before the delivery of *The American Scholar*: "Carlyle and Wordsworth now act out of England on us, -- Coleridge also." See Frank T. Thompson, "Emerson's Indebtedness to Coleridge," *Studies in Philology* 23, no. 1 (Jan. 1926): 55-76. See also Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert, "The Revival of Frühromantik in the Anglophone World," *Philosophy Today* (Spring 2005): 96-117.

(1861-1949), a (mainly Jesuit) tradition of 'transcendental Thomism,' inaugurated by Joseph Maréchal (1878–1944), that attempts to harmonize Kant and Aquinas, continues to exert its influence in contemporary Catholic theology, chiefly in response to the works of Karl Rahner (1904-84) and Bernard Lonergan (1904-84).[130] It is also worth noting at the outset that many of the *früh Romantiker* themselves did not see their projects as hostile to Christian faith. Schleiermacher certainly did not. Wordsworth never left the Church of England, and Coleridge famously found his way back to it. Friedrich Schlegel actually converted to Catholicism in 1808 and published a Catholic magazine, *Concordia* (1820-23).[131] That there was a nostalgic, conservative 'Roman' tinge to the 'Romantic' movement was something on which its early critics like Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) disapprovingly harped. That *romantik* themes might agreeably modulate into a Catholic key would not have surprised them or the *früh Romantiker* themselves.

In the remainder of this chapter, we will set the stage to receive (in Chapter Four) Emersonian 'naturalism' as a reflection of Emerson's fundamental Platonic orientation to creation, one that borrows from Thomistic, Kantian and Romantic inflections of Platonism to form a distinctive, coherent *bricolage*. I take Kant's transcendental idealism to be a defensive response to the partial collapse of the plausibility structures on which the Thomistic expressions of the Platonic imagination rested. The Romantic reaction to Kant, in turn, amounts to an attempt to preserve aspects of Kant's moral imagination—especially its emphasis on freedom—while restoring elements of Christian Platonism—especially the emphasis on grace and participation—through the introduction of aesthetic categories. It is upon this conservative, Romantic inflection of the Platonic imagination, with its emphasis on 'beauty,' that Emersonian individualism most overtly rests, and, in the concluding remarks to this chapter, I find that this foundation turns out to be surprisingly accommodating to some strains of post-Conciliar Catholic thought, especially those having to do with the nature of vocation.

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[130] For a succinct history of transcendental Thomism and its reception, see W. Norris Clarke, *The Philosophical Approach to God: A New Thomistic Perspective, 2nd edition*. (Fordham University Press, 2007). See also Stephen M. Fields, "The Reception of Aquinas in Twentieth-Century Transcendental Thomism," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception of Aquinas*, ed. Matthew Levering and Marcus Plested (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 408-423.

[131] Wordsworth's Christianity is on full display in *The Excursion* (1814) and *Ecclesiastical Sketches* (1822); Coleridge's in *Lay Sermons* (1817), *Aids to Reflection* (1825) and *The Constitution of Church and State (*1830).

In the previous chapter, we established Christian touchstones—sin, faith, grace and freedom—in order to facilitate the association of certain themes in Emerson with those within the broad tradition of Christian theological reflection. In this chapter, we do something similar, establishing touchstones necessary to locate Emerson somewhat more precisely within a tradition of *philosophical* theology. To that end, we are going to tease out major themes within that tradition that are most salient for our understanding of Emerson from a Catholic point of view. A variety of ideas and images – divine hierarchy of being, participation, plentitude, rational faith, ultimate dependence, to name a few – will emerge in the process that we will group into three broad 'types' of Platonic imagination: Thomistic, Kantian and Romantic. This chapter is designed mainly to help us get a grip on the ideas and images; in the next chapter, we will put them to more critical use.

The Platonic imagination

History & reception

As important as Plato himself is to the development of the Platonic imagination, it is the contributions of the Middle Platonists, notably those of Plutarch (46-120), and the Neoplatonists, notably Plotinus (204/5-270), Porphyry (234-305) and Iamblichus (245-325), that are responsible for developing a 'system' called Platon*ism*, the most fully developed version of which is usually credited to Proclus (412-485).[132] While Porphyry famously wrote a treatise *Against the Christians*, the reality is that many Platonists and Christians found much to recommend to one another. In general, the prominent early Christian Platonists were Greek and Roman converts who wanted to put their learning at the service of their new faith. Clement (160-220) and Origen (185-253), among the earliest Christian Platonists, called Alexandria home, where they were exposed to and able to build upon the Platonic interpretations of the Hebrew scriptures offered by Philo of Alexandria (20BCE-40CE), a Hellenized Jew, who may even have directly

[132] The terms 'Middle Platonism' and 'Neoplatonism' were invented in the 1770s by German historians of philosophy. Plotinus, *et. al.* would have simply thought of themselves as Platonists. According to Plotinus, in fact, Platonism actually pre-dates Plato. Among the ancients that Plotinus claims saw the truth of Platonism, albeit dimly, are Parmenides, Pythagoras, Anaxagoras, Heraclitus and Empedocles. See John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists: 80 B.C. to A.D. 220* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996 [1977]).

influenced St. Paul and the author of the Gospel of John. Alexandrian Platonism influenced the Cappadocian and Desert Fathers, as well as Marius Victorinus (281/291- ?) and Bishop Ambrose of Milan (339-391), whose famous convert, Augustine of Hippo (354-430), wove his attenuated Platonism into the very fabric of the Christian intellectual tradition.[133]

Even the efforts of Aquinas and Albert Magnus (1200-1280) before him to incorporate Aristotle into the theological tradition proved to be a boon for Platonism as well.[134] In fact, the teacher was regularly mistaken for his student, for even though some translations of Aristotle into Latin made directly from Greek texts were available from the earlier part of the 12th century – the *Organon* translated by Boethius was one of them – most translations of Aristotle were made from 9th century Arabic translations of 6th century Syriac texts, and among these texts were a variety of Platonic treatises which were falsely attributed to Aristotle, including the *Enneads* of Plotinus and the *Institutio theologica* of Proclus.[135]

The Scholasticism of the 14th century whetted the Christian appetite for pre-Christian ideas just as troves of ancient texts were being discovered or translated into Latin for the first time. In 1345, Petrarch (1304-1374) discovered a collection of Cicero's letters in the Chapter Library of Verona Cathedral. He also pieced together manuscript fragments of Livy's *History of*

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[133] A more 'mystical' inflection of Platonism was developed by Pseudo-Dionysius in the 6th century, but it was not until 875 that the first translations of Dionysius into Latin were made, definitively by John Scottus Eriugena (800-877). The influence of Dionysius is profound in Eriugena's own thought as it would be later in the Franciscan tradition, especially in Robert Grosseteste (1168-1253) and St. Bonaventure (1221-1274). The Dionysian strain of Christian Platonism features more prominently in the Eastern Church, remaining mostly an undercurrent in Christian thought in the Latin West, where its influence is most overt and unabashed among members of the 'French' School, founded by Pierre de Bérulle (1575–1629) and associated with such notables as Louis Lallemant (1578-1635), St. Vincent de Paul (1581-1660), Charles de Condren (1588-1641), St. Jean Eudes (1601-80), Jean-Jacques Olier (1608-1657), St. John Baptist de la Salle (1651-1719) and St. Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort (1673-1716). See Henri Bremond, *A Literary History of Religious Thought in France from the Wars of Religion Down to Our Own Times*, 3 volumes, trans. K. L. Montgomery (New York,: Macmillan Co., 1928–30).

[134] While they are best known for other works, Albert and Thomas each wrote commentaries on the *Divine Names* of Pseudo-Dionysius. In fact, Dionysus's abiding-procession-return triad may be said to form the essential structure of the *Summa Theologica*. See Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992).

[135] Brian P. Copenhaver and Charles B. Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy (A History of Western Philosophy, Vol. 3)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 133: "Given the quantity of Platonic material transmitted [through Arabic authorities] or generally in the air in medieval universities, it is not surprising that parts of Thomist metaphysics owe more to Augustine, Proclus, or Plotinus than to Aristotle." On Platonism in Aquinas's thought, see Arthur Little, *The Platonic Heritage of Thomism* (Dublin: Golden Eagle Books, 1949). W. Norris Clarke, "The Limitation of Act by Potency in St. Thomas: Aristotelianism or Neoplatonism?" *New Scholasticism* 26 (1952): 167-94. "The Meaning of Participation in St. Thomas," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 26 (1952): 147-57. John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 94-131 and Rudi te Vedle, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

Rome. With Petrarch's encouragement, Leontis Pilatus (d. 1366) translated the whole of Homer and Euripides's *Hecuba* for Boccaccio (1313-1375). As chancellor of Florence in 1375, Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406) amassed the 800 volumes that would eventually form the nucleus of the library at the Dominican Convent of San Marco. He pressed for translations of Plato's dialogues and charged his protégée Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444) with the task of presenting them to the Latin world. Bruni himself translated, among other works, the *Phaedrus*, the *Phaedo* and Aristotle's *Politics*. In 1397, Manuel Chrysoloras (1355-1415) became the first of many municipally paid teachers of Greek in Florence, bringing with him a spate of Greek texts he had gathered during his journeys across the Empire, including works by Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon.[136]

Provided that gnostic tendencies were kept sufficiently in check, the Christian appropriation of ancient Greek and Latin texts was generally acceptable to the Roman curia. Ovid's *Ars amatoria* came to be read as a work of Christian formation, while Cicero's *Letters*, Seneca's *Fabula crepidata* and Virgil's *Aeneid* were mined for illustrations of Christian virtues. Marsillo Ficino (1433-1499) went so far as to insist that Plato be read in the churches and claimed Socrates and Plato as forerunners of Christ. Platonism even found fresh habitats among some Protestants, especially in England. A group of Cambridge fellows and tutors – among them Benjamin Whichcote (1609–83), Peter Sterry (1613–72), Henry More (1614–87), Ralph Cudworth (1617–88), John Smith (1618–52), Nathaniel Culverwell (1619–51), Anne Conway (1630–79), George Rust (d. 1670) and John Norris (1657–1712) – came to be known in the 19th century as the Cambridge Platonists.[137] As some of the first philosophers to write in English, we owe terms now as commonplace as 'materialism', 'consciousness' and 'Cartesianism' to their coinage. The Cambridge Platonists were also the first English thinkers to present themselves as 'philosophers of religion.' It is worth noting that Coleridge, no small influence on Emerson's

[136] Anthony Levi, *Renaissance and Reformation: The Intellectual Genesis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 87–94.

[137] It is worth noting that they did not self-identify as a group or as Platonists. They came to be referred to as such in the eighteenth century. For a contemporary assessment of the ideas and significance of the Cambridge Platonists, see Sarah Hutton "The Cambridge Platonists: Some New Studies," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 25, no. 5 (2017): 851-857 and Daniel Walker Howe, "The Cambridge Platonists of Old England and the Cambridge Platonists of New England," *Church History* 57, no. 4 (Dec. 1988): 470-485.

thought, credits the Cambridge Platonists for introducing ideas that were then and often still are attributed to Kant.[138]

Emerson drank deeply and often from the Platonic well.[139] He preferred his Plato in Greek, but he also leaned on English translations by Thomas Taylor (1758-1835) and Floyer Sydenham (1710-1787) as well as on the French translations by Cousin when they became available in 1832. Emerson treated his London, 1820 edition of Cudworth's *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678) as a sourcebook of quotations and ideas from the "ancient bards and sages" including not only Plato himself but also Aristotle and the Neoplatonists.[140] Emerson had a special affinity for Proclus.

> I take many stimulants and often make an art of my inebriation. I read Proclus for my opium; it excites my imagination to let sail before me the pleasing and grand figures of gods and daemons and demoniacal men. I hear of rumors rife among the most ancient gods, of azonic gods who are itinerants, of daemons with fulgid eyes, of the unenvying and exuberant will of the gods; the aquatic gods, the Plain of Truth, the meadow, the nutriment of the gods, the paternal port, and all the rest of the Platonic rhetoric quoted as household words. By all these and so many rare and brave words I am filled with hilarity and spring, my heart dances, my sight is quickened, I behold shining relations between all beings, and am impelled to write and almost to sing. I think one would grow handsome who read Proclus much and well.[141]

Core ideas

In *Aristotle and Other Platonists*, Lloyd P. Gerson articulates seven high-level commitments that collectively constitute the sort of Platonism to which both Plato and Aristotle subscribe:

- The universe has a systematic unity.
- The systematic unity is an explanatory hierarchy.
- The divine constitutes an irreducible explanatory category.

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[138] See Arthur O. Lovejoy, "Kant and the English Platonists" in *Essays Philosophical and Psychological in Honor of William James by His Colleagues* (267-302).
[139] See Stuart Gerry Brown, "Emerson's Platonism," *The New England Quarterly*, Sep., 1945, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Sep., 1945), pp. 325-345; Vivian C. Hopkins, "Emerson and Cudworth: Plastic Nature and Transcendental Art," *American Literature*, Mar., 1951, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Mar., 1951), 80-98; Jesse Bailey, "Emerson on Plato: Literary Philosophy, Dialectic, and the Temporality of Thought." *Humanitas* 29, no. 1,2 (2016): 79–94.
[140] JMN 3:489.
[141] JMN 6:375-6.

- The psychological constitutes an irreducible explanatory category.
- Persons belong to the systematic hierarchy and personal happiness consists in achieving a lost position within the hierarchy.
- Moral and aesthetic valuation follows the hierarchy.
- The epistemological order is included within the metaphysical order.[142]

In this section, I flesh out the nature of some of these commitments in some detail, as I take them to be the 'core' truths constituting the Platonic imagination upon which both Emersonian individualism and the Catholic faith might continue to converge.

At the core of Platonism in all its varieties is the image of a hierarchy of beings, at the pinnacle of which is a singular, perfect and divine being. Beings are valued relative to their proximity to the divine being. Among all beings, human beings are a special case in that they are understood to be 'out of position.' Their position is not, however, fixed; human beings have the capacity to improve (or worsen) their position in the hierarchy. In fact, their happiness consists in reclaiming their lost position within the hierarchy, a process referred to as 'becoming like God.' Of course, becoming like the Christian God is not the same as becoming like the Platonic God of the ancients. Christians are called to become like a *loving* God— It did not occur to the ancient Greeks and Romans to love their gods, much less that their gods loved them. Probably before but certainly since the First Council of Nicaea (325), Christians have unapologetically grafted love and other attributes of the personality of Jesus Christ onto the Platonic God; and, the Platonic superstructure has proven quite accommodating to these accretions, contributing to the long-term and ongoing relationship between Platonism and Christianity.

Even though, in the Christian tradition, human beings are said to be created in the image (צֶלֶם *tselem*, εἰκών *eikon*, *imagio*) and likeness (דְּמוּת *demuth*, ὁμοίωμα *homoióma*, *similitude*) of God, it is the Word (אֵמֶר *emer,* λόγος *logos, verbum*) of God that is the fundamental *imago Dei*. Human beings are so many images of that Word. As Clement of Alexandria puts it:

> [T]he image of God is His Word, the genuine Son of Mind, the Divine Word, the archetypal light of light; and the image of the Word is the true man, the mind which is in man, who is therefore said to have been made "in the image and likeness of God," assimilated to the Divine Word in the affections of the soul,

[142] Lloyd P. Gerson, *Aristotle and Other Platonists*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 32-34.

> and therefore rational; but effigies sculptured in human form, the earthly image of that part of man which is visible and earth-born, are but a perishable impress of humanity, manifestly wide of the truth.[143]

Christian Platonism tends to be organized as a series of such correspondences—the Divine Word is reflected in Christ as the Incarnate Word, who is reflected in the text of Scripture, which is reflected, finally, at the long end of the chain, by the highest thoughts within the human mind. Theology built upon this notion of correspondences between 'perfect' ideas and 'less-than-perfect' images (some of which are words) will have a sort of skepticism built into it; but, such skepticism is always somewhat mitigated. It is never total.

Another core belief of Platonism in all its varieties is that the hierarchy of beings is bisected horizontally at some point to create two realms of being: a realm of embodied, sensible beings and a realm of disembodied, supersensible but ultimately intelligible beings.[144] The existence of the former depends upon the latter. What exists in the sensible world, as Plato says in the *Republic*, "is and is not simultaneously, so to speak."[145] The sensible world is like a mirror, reflecting the intelligible realm, although not perfectly. Platonists may argue among themselves as to the precise nature of objects in the intelligible realm – the *noeta* – but none disputes the existence of such objects nor that they cause (in some special sense) sensible objects to be.

Platonists have a name for this special mode of being: 'having with' or participation (μέθεξις *methexis*).[146] Aristotle traces the origin of the idea not to Plato but to the Pythagoreans, who taught that all things exist by imitation (μίμησις *mimesis*) specifically of numbers. According to Aristotle, Plato simply introduced a new term to refer to this old way of thinking, leaving undecided what exactly participation could be or whether it differs in some meaningful way from imitation.[147] It is true that participation in the writings of Plato is more asserted than developed; and, neither the Middle Platonists, Neoplatonists nor Plotinus with his scheme of 'emanation' shed much light on the topic. What is clear, however, is its function: with the idea of 'participation' Platonists are attempting to indicate that they do not want to posit an unbridgeable

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[143] Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, trans. William Wilson, Ch. 10. https://www.logoslibrary.org/clement/heathen/10.html (last accessed May 31, 2023).
[144] *Rep.* 476A–480B, 508C1, 509D1–3, 517B3; *Soph*. 254A8–10; *Phd*. 79A6.
[145] *Rep.* 478D5–9; *Tht.* 156A5; *Tim.* 52B3–5.
[146] *Rep.* 476C7–D2.
[147] *Meta.* 987B 10–14.

gap between the intelligible and sensible realms. Platonists are not, in this sense, dualists. Theirs is a 'two realms, one world' theory; their world is fundamentally a unified whole. The whole in some way *causes* its parts to be (not the other way around as the Epicureans, we shall see in a moment, would have it). Another way of saying this is that Platonists are more fundamentally concerned with a kind of causality that is not exactly captured by one of Aristotle's four causes (*attia*). While Aristotle's causes are primarily intended to explain how things come to be and cease to be, move and change, the Platonist is concerned additionally about how different levels of being relate and with what constitutes their being as such.

Aquinas—following Aristotle and building upon the groundwork of William of Auvergne (1180/90-1249) and his Christian appropriations of Avicenna (980-1037) and Avicebron (1021-1070), among others – expresses this difference by distinguishing two principles of being (*ens*): being-in-existence (*esse*) and being-in-essence (*essentia*). Only in God is essence identical with existence. Everything else exists in a limited way. Essence limits existence in the act of being; it is what makes each being distinct from every other, the reason (from God's point of view) why it is this being and not that one.[148] For Aquinas, existence is not a brutal *fact* about beings that, once acknowledged, has little role to play, but rather an *act* of all-encompassing and animating plenitude. Existence thus becomes a kind of ontological glue connecting particular beings—even divine beings—with one another.

The Epicurean opposition

It is, in some ways, easier to grasp what Platonism is not than what exactly it is. To such ends, Gerson, in a work subsequent to *Aristotle and Other Platonists*, has worked up a series of 'anti-'statements that help us to imagine the antithesis of Platonism.[149] According to Gerson, Platonism rejects the following positions:

- anti-materialism (*i.e.* for a Platonist it is false that the only things that exist are bodies and their properties)

[148] ST I, q.4, a. 1.
[149] Lloyd P. Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 10-19. See also Lloyd P. Gerson, *Platonism and Naturalism: The Possibility of Philosophy*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020), 26-32.

- anti-mechanism (*i.e.* a Platonist holds that the only sort of explanations available in principle to a materialist are inadequate for explaining the natural order)
- anti-nominalism (*i.e.* for a Platonist it is false that the only things that exist are individuals, each uniquely situated in space and time)
- anti-relativism (*i.e.* for a Platonist truth and goodness are properties of being)
- anti-skepticism (*i.e.* a Platonist holds that knowledge is possible)

The term 'naturalism' is often used as a term of art in both philosophical and theological circles to refer to the school of thought that is opposed to Platonism. However, because Emerson identifies himself as a 'naturalist,' the standard name will mislead and generally not serve us well. In place of 'naturalism,' I propose 'Epicurianism' as the name for the opposite of Platonism, a term that has the benefit of parallelism (like Platonism, it is derived from the name of a roughly contemporary Greek philosopher) and historical accuracy, for, as we shall see, many notable anti-Platonists since Plato have referred to themselves as Epicureans.

Platonism, especially under its Aristotelian auspices, has enjoyed longstanding intellectual currency in the West – A.N. Whitehead's assessment that European philosophy is "a series of footnotes to Plato" is barely an exaggeration. The same cannot be said for Epicureanism which, until quite recently, has never been more than a minority position. Epicurus (341-270 BCE) himself developed ideas initially put forward by Leucippus, Democritus and Protagoras, against all of whom Plato railed, into a system that served as the primary foil for latter-day Platonists. Whereas for Platonists, ideas are what truly matter, for the Epicurean, all that matters *is* matter. The universe is composed of atoms—small, indivisible bits of matter— whirling about in a void which may or may not be infinite. These atoms come in different shapes and sizes. They repel one another, collide and occasionally combine into clusters to form worlds (*cosmoi*). The world we know arose from the collision of atoms whirling about thusly, and it will disintegrate in time. It is, as all worlds are, impermanent. Insofar as Epicureans have anything to say about the gods (they tend not to dwell on the topic), the gods had nothing to do with the creation of the world, nor do they have anything to do with its ongoing maintenance. It is not even clear that the gods are aware of us. They live, perhaps eternally (but, since they are presumably made of atoms like everything else, perhaps not), in the spaces between the worlds. Toward us the gods are at least indifferent, and they certainly do not judge us. When we die, we

simply cease to be. From this doctrine arose the Epicurean epitaph: *Non fui, fui, non sum, non curo* ("I was not; I was; I am not; I do not care").

Such an impersonal and effectively Godless cosmology is not obviously friendly to Christian belief; it is not for nothing in the *Divine Comedy* that Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) depicts Epicureans residing among the heretics in the sixth circle of hell. For while Epicureanism is not necessarily atheistic in its implications, it certainly does accommodate a healthy indifferentism. Unlike Platonism, Epicureanism generates no internal momentum in the direction of a being like the Christian God, and it enjoys no historical connection to Christian thought and identity.

The Epicurean imagination has special difficulty countenancing Christian morality. For one thing, the soul, being material, does not survive the death of the body. There can be no punishment after death, nor anything like an eternal reward. All that morality can amount to is the maximization of pleasure or at least a minimization of pain in this world. Both grace and freedom are, for the Epicurean, literally unimaginable. Everything that happens – in our own minds or in the world around us – is caused by some antecedent happening. In such a world, if we had perfect information about all relevant antecedent conditions, we could, in principle, predict the future, and our present actions are not really *actions* at all but rather mere *activities* or *events* caused by prior events (some Epicureans did allow for randomness in the motion of atoms—a swerve in their forward course—which accounts for the only sort of freedom there can possibly be). There is no good reason to treat human beings differently from the atoms and molecules that are the subject matter of the physicist and chemist. We can no more hold them accountable for their behavior than we can atoms and molecules for the frequency of their vibrations. In such a world our ordinary moral practices would be rendered irrational, if not absurd, for it makes little sense to hold people accountable for doing things they could not otherwise have done.[150]

For an Epicurean, the most important and puzzling phenomena we encounter in this world can be explained satisfactorily in terms of elementary physical particles from which things 'evolve' or upon which phenomena 'supervene.' The world is to be explained, in other words,

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[150] ST I, q. 83, a. 1: [H]omo est liberi arbitrii: alioquin frustra essent consilia, exhortationes, praecepta, prohibitiones, praemia et poenae: "Man has free-will: otherwise counsels, exhortations, commands, prohibitions, rewards, and punishments would be in vain."

from the 'bottom-up;' and, insofar as 'bottom-up' explanations are found to be satisfying, there is little need to explain anything from the 'top-down.' Top-down explanations can be considered superfluous, and the desire for them pathological or at least a sign of immaturity, something one ought to, from an Epicurean perspective, 'get over.'

The fortunes of Epicureanism began to reverse as the predictive successes of the experimental sciences accumulated over the course of the 16th and 17th centuries. One began to hear whispers – in the hallways of the College Royal in Paris, at meetings of the *Académie Mersenne* across Europe – that perhaps the Epicurean imagination was capable, after all, of representing the way things really might be. Pierre Gassendi (1592-1665), a French Franciscan, began to rehabilitate the reputation of Epicureanism in his *De vita, moribus, et doctrina Epicuri libri octo* (1647) and *Syntagma philosophiae Epicuri* (1649). An English adaptation of this latter work was produced by Walter Charleton entitled *Physiologia Epicuro-Gassendo-Charletonia* (1654). Gassendi travelled in intellectual circles that included the likes of Johannes Kepler (1571-1630), Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), Marin Mersenne (1588-1648), Isaac Beeckman (1588-1637) and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1678). Members of the Royal Society took Epicureanism seriously, too. Epicurean influences can be detected in the works of Robert Boyle (1627-91), Christiaan Huygens (1629-65), John Locke (1632-1704) and Isaac Newton (1642-1726/7). Epicureanism also became fashionable among prominent 18th century intellectuals and revolutionaries – Denis Diderot (1713-1784) and Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) called themselves Epicureans.[151]

Although most of these scholars and 'men of science' went out of their respective ways to affirm the compatibility of Epicureanism with Christianity, at least in public, such affirmations over time became less important and, frankly, less convincing. The Epicurean image of the universe seemed sufficient to account for the progress of the experimental sciences; its minimalism was certainly attractive at a time when disagreements did abound as to the nature of immaterial reality. Epicureanism's lack of entanglement with notions of divinity actually counted

[151] "I too am an Epicurean. I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing every thing rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us." Thomas Jefferson, "From Thomas Jefferson to William Short, 31 October 1819: https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-15-02-0141-0001#:~:text=%27%20your%20love%20of%20repose%20will,regulated%20indulgences%20of%20Epicurus%20ensure (last accessed January 9, 2024). See also Jared Holley, "The Poison and the Spider's Web: Diderot and Eighteenth-Century French Epicureanism," *History of European Ideas* 41, no. 8 (2015): 1107-1124.

in its favor in an atmosphere fatigued from the wars of religion and seeking some sort of common, uncontroverted ground on which to rest. Its novelty appealed to those hungry for a fresh start, and its 'edginess' appealed to the revolutionary kind.

Scripture and intuition

The Platonic imagination, in its Thomistic inflection, can hold its own against the Epicurean opposition so long as one has recourse to a canonical collection of words and other images, curated by a learned priestly class that is trusted to interpret and give voice to them, that can deliver special revelations about the supernatural world. Such is an idea the Protestant Reformation, both intentionally and unintentionally, did much to upset. Having questioned the authority of the priesthood and many of the sacraments, teachings and traditions of the institutional Church, Protestants leaned heavily on what was left – the plain meaning of the Word of God revealed in Scripture – to backstop their reforming agendas. English Protestants appealed to underground traditions of Biblical interpretation which drew from Lollard manuscripts that were over a century old. Cheap editions of the Bible in English and bootlegged copies of the Geneva Bible were plentiful by the reign of Edward VI (1547-53), and by the time James I had issued his Authorized Version in 1611, the Bible already was functioning as a resource for the working classes in the same way as Greek and Roman classics functioned for the chattering ones.[152]

So long as its sense and reference remained stable and clear, Scripture could serve Protestants as an effective cypher, permitting supernatural meaning to flow into events in the natural world. Few doubted that in Scripture there was such meaning to be had; the challenge was one of interpretation, and there was one grand hermeneutical challenge that Luther himself, having presumed the general intelligibility of Holy Writ when read in the light of faith, did not really address: What to do when Scripture is vague or silent? Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520-1575), among the first of Luther's disciples to address the topic, suggested that our failure to understand the meaning and applicability of Scripture is due mainly to our unfamiliarity with its

[152] Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 6.

distinctive language and grammar.[153] Thus, the first part of his *Clavis spripturae sacrae* (1567) is unsurprisingly a lexicon of the Bible, including a detailed concordance of parallel passages.[154] Such a hermeneutic approach, typical of early Protestants, certainly engages the faculty of reason; but, it does so seeking to preserve and elucidate rather than explain away or 'naturalize' the mysteries of faith. Reason assists revelation; it does not seek to replace it. Thus, despite the polemics against Aquinas by Luther and his followers, early Protestants tended to be Thomists at least with respect to their attitudes toward reason as a propaedeutic to faith.[155]

This changed over the course of the 18th century as German biblical scholars, following the leads of Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768) and the English Deists of the 17th century, began to look at Scripture in freshly critical ways. Johann Salomo Semler (1725-91), who, in 1757, succeeded Siegmund Jakob Baumgarten (1706-57) as head of the theological faculty at Halle, was among the first to teach that the accounts of the miracles in the gospels could be explained without appealing to supernatural causes. At the same time, Johann Jakob Griesbach (1745-1812) and Johann Gottfried Eichorn (1752-1827) advanced theories to account for the similarities and differences among the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke (the so-called Synoptic Problem). After Eichorn used the term in the second edition of his *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (1804), these methods collectively came to be referred to as the 'higher criticism' of the Bible. The 'higher' critics treated the Bible roughly, as a text like any other, asking questions about its authorship, the historical setting in which it was written, its purpose and its style. While the Old Testament had long been subject to this kind of criticism, analysis of the New Testament had rarely gone beyond the textual analysis of its Latin and Greek sources. The program of the higher critics was carried out expertly by Heinrich Eberhard Gottlob Paulus (1761-1851) who wielded considerable influence having succeeded Eichorn in 1789 as professor ordinarius of Oriental languages at Jena (where he fraternized with Goethe and Schiller, among other notables) before accepting, in 1811, a position as professor of exegesis and church history

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[153] Flacius, loyal to Luther, naturally blames the Roman curia for keeping us ignorant of such things.
[154] Flacius does acknowledge that a purely grammatical approach has its limits. He recognizes that the importance of considering the context in which a book is composed, and he notes that allegorical interpretations can be legitimate. possible. See Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale Univerity Press, 1994), 42-44.
[155] David Luy, "Sixteenth-Century Reception of Aquinas by Luther and Lutheran Reformers," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception of Aquinas*, Matthew Levering and Marcus Plested, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 104-120.

at Heidelberg (where he was instrumental in recruiting Hegel to the faculty). That Scripture might be purely the product of the minds of men, not the inspired Word of God and gateway to supernatural truths, increasingly was becoming a possibility that could not easily be ignored.

Emerson himself was acquainted with the higher criticism in a personal way. His elder brother, William, had left in 1824 to study theology in Germany – "the Paradise of Dictionaries & Critics" – where he audited Eichorn's lectures on the synoptic gospels at Göttingen. These lectures seem to have shaken William's faith, so much so that he sojourned to Weimar to seek the counsel of Goethe. Goethe, while cordial, provided little consolation, and almost immediately upon his return on October 18, 1826, William – to the chagrin of his mother and especially his aunt – announced that he was abandoning his ministerial training and would be preparing instead to practice law.

The claims of the higher critics were being taken seriously indeed at Harvard by the time Emerson entered divinity school in 1825. In his short stint as Hollis Professor of Divinity, Joseph Stevens Buckminster (1784-1812) saw to it that Griesbach's critical edition of the New Testament was published in America. It would serve as a textbook at Harvard for decades. Andrews Norton (1786-1853), the "Unitarian Pope," appointed the Dexter Professor of Sacred Literature at Harvard in 1819, embraced the methods of the higher critics – at least those of Eichorn—in his debates with Moses Stewart (1780-1852), professor of sacred literature at Andover Theological Seminary and the 'father' of exegetical studies in America. Norton did not disagree with Stewart about the importance of philology, but the allegedly "simple and universal rules of expounding language" to which Stewart appealed were, according to Norton, anything but simple or universal. Instead, "the intrinsic ambiguity of language" meant that more than simply a lexicon and grammar are necessary to accurately translate any text, much less the ancient texts that comprise the Bible. One must interpret any text – the Bible included – "according to the purposes, feelings circumstances and principles of the writer, and according to the genius and idioms of the language which he uses."[156] Norton was skeptical that a word-for-word translation could capture the sense of Biblical language in its original context.

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[156] quoted in John Michael, *Emerson and Skepticism: The Cipher of the World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 13-16.

Considerations extrinsic to the text itself could not simply be ignored.[157] Philosophy and history must supplement philology.

Norton must have known he was playing with fire. As John Michael observes, "Norton's skepticism threatens to engulf the object it is meant to preserve. Having invoked the intrinsic ambiguity of language as the origin of interpretation, he is unable to save interpretation from the ambiguities of language in which it originates."[158] In other words, since the texts by which one might have access to an author's intent and cultural milieu are themselves subject to interpretation, one unavoidably finds oneself in situations in which interpretation rests on interpretation— turtles, as it were, all the way down. To avoid infinite regress, it becomes necessary sooner or later to posit what David H. Finkelstein calls "mysterious, regress stopping items—items from which significance flows into all our signs and gestures, but which themselves neither need nor brook interpretation."[159]

For Emerson's generation, the most promising source for such regress-stopping items were moral intuitions of the sort forged by the native Scottish resistance to David Hume (1711-1776), led by Thomas Reid (1710-96) and received by Emerson chiefly through the eyes of Dugald Stewart (1753-1828).[160] Those following in the footsteps of Reid and Stewart—founder and steward, respectively, of what is sometimes called the Scottish School of Common Sense—believe that neither deductions from innate ideas nor pragmatic calculations of utility generate the right sort of reasons to give when asked for the grounds of one's moral judgements. Moral judgements, in fact, do not involve any sort of reasoning or calculation. One does not infer so much as perceive what is good. According to Reid, moral properties such as *being wrong* or *being obligatory* are effectively built into certain actions and events. We apprehend these moral properties intuitively by means of a "moral sense" analogous to the way our five world-facing senses apprehend properties of objects in the material world. These moral

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[157] Richard A. Grusin, *Transcendentalist Hermeneutics: Institutional Authority and the Higher Criticism of the Bible* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 68.
[158] Michael, *Emerson and Skepticism*, 14-15.
[159] Alice Crary and Rupert Read, eds., *The New Wittgenstein* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 56.
[160] Stewart was among the first British philosophers to discuss Kant, at first dismissively in his *Philosophical Essays* (1816), but later more substantively in Part II of his *A Preliminary Dissertation Exhibiting a General View of the Progress of Metaphysical, Moral and Political Philosophy Since the Revival of Letters in Europe* (1821). He read Kant not in the German, however, but in Latin, primarily sourced from Friedrich Gottlob's translation of 1796. See Jonathan Friday, "Dugald Stewart on Reid, Kant and the Refutation of Idealism," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (2005): 263-286.

properties elicit (somehow) certain types of affective states in us called "moral sentiments," each one a special kind of "judgment accompanied with feeling."[161]

In the Scottish Common Sense School, being unable to explain exactly how one perceives moral properties is no good reason to doubt that one can, in fact, fairly perceive them. God just made the world this way— for the sake of salvation the 'constant conjunction' of certain judgements and moral sentiments is divinely guaranteed. There is little to be done for someone who fails to perceive the world as infused with these moral properties. Such a person is effectively broken; his or her moral sense is defective. Supernatural involvement—an act of grace—of course might fix the problem, but this is not something over which *we* have any control. Such a position was at home among Presbyterians, where an inability to perceive moral properties and receive the moral sentiments could reasonably be interpreted in light of a severe form of Calvinism as a sign that perhaps one was not, after all, to be counted among the elect; but, for more liberal Protestants, Catholics and Deists alike, for whom the scope of salvation, to varying degrees and for different reasons, needed to be broad, such a 'common sense' solution was barely acceptable.

Like the liberal Christians generally, Norton appealed to the testimony of an innate moral sense to forestall interpretations of Scripture he found objectionable; at the same time, he reserved the right to appeal to that same Scripture to undermine claims grounded on what he took to be the defective moral sense of others. Logically, at least, he must have known he could not have it both ways. So long as one's opinions accorded with the pronouncements of men like Norton, one had little incentive to press too hard on this contradiction; but, once the ministrations of such men began to be resented and questioned, the deliverances of the 'moral sense' unsurprisingly began to lose their unanimity. When Norton appealed to moral sense in order to condemn 'the latest form of infidelity' represented by Emerson, the orthodox saw perhaps more

[161] While Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713) was the first to employ the term 'moral sense,' Frances Hutcheson (1694-1746) was the first to use the term 'moral sense' toward philosophical ends. Reid's moral sense differs from Hutcheson's in that Reid reverses the order of explanation between sentiment and judgment. Moral judgments elicit moral sentiments, not *vice versa* as Hutcheson (and Hume) would have it. See J. B. Schneewind, ed, *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 503-524.

clearly than the liberals the extent to which that infidelity was consistent with—even perhaps a logical extension of—the hermeneutical practices of Norton himself. [162]

A nostalgic retreat to the plain meaning of Scripture was, naturally, an option for some, but for those without orthodox leanings it was not obvious where they should turn to find new regress-stopping items. One place to which many did end up turning for ontological anchorage, Emerson included, was Germany, where Kant presented a fresh way forward with his so-called 'transcendental' idealism. The ferment surrounding Kant and his reception serves as an important part of the intellectual background against which Emersonian individualism is cast. So, let us turn, first, to Kant, before we examine Romantic appropriations and Emersonian incorporations of some of his leading ideas.

The Platonic Kant

That Kant is not known primarily as a Platonist should not blind us to the extent to which Kant believes that the natural, created world reflects the order, harmony and plenitude of a supernatural, uncreated and divine being. His sense of things resonates profoundly with the sensibility associated with the Platonic imagination.[163] I suppose Kant is best known as one who breaks with the perennial tradition of theological Platonism by denying the possibility of knowledge about God; however, I do not read Kant this way.[164] While my Platonic Kant does, in fact, deny the possibility of *knowledge* about God, strictly speaking, we need not feel pressured to disqualify him from the Platonic tradition any more than we might feel pressured to disqualify Aquinas, who makes an analogous claim with respect to our apprehension of supernatural truths.

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[162] See Robert D. Habich, "Emerson's Reluctant Foe: Andrews Norton and the Transcendental Controversy," *The New England Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (Jun. 1992): 208-237.

[163] On Kant's Platonism, see Christopher J. Insole. *Kant and the Divine: From Contemplation to the Moral Law*. (Oxford University Press, 2020), 56-76. See also his "A Thomistic Reading of Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals: Searching for the Unconditioned," *Modern Theology* 31, no. 2 (April 2015): 284-311. "Although Kant was undoubtedly influenced in his upbringing by Lutheran pietism (which he seems to have not much liked), his intellectual formation was saturated in the categories of rationalist theology, which was heavily indebted to scholastic categories of thought, with an indirect but significant route back to Aquinas, and to classical thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle. In this he was not at all untypical of his time, with a similarly eclectic mix being found in the biographies of those who were influential upon Kant, such as Leibniz, Wolff, Baumgarten, Meier and Knutzen."

[164] I follow Insole's interpretation here. See his *Kant and the Divine: From Contemplation to the Moral Law*. (Oxford University Press, 2020), 104-112.

As we will see in this section, both Aquinas and Kant leave ample enough room for faith as a mode of 'holding as true' claims about that which lies beyond the created, sensible world.

As they are for Reid, intuitions (*Anschauungen*) serve as foundational elements in Kant's theory of cognition (*Erkenntnistheorie*); however, what Kant means by 'intuition' is fundamentally distinct from the meaning of the term in the school of Scottish Common Sense. Nothing uncreated, nonnatural or supernatural lies at the other end of an intuition for Kant; rather, intuitions are *of* the natural, created world. More specifically, intuitions are composites of sensations (*Empfindungen),* which Kant calls the 'material' of intuition, and the 'pure forms' of space and time in which they are packaged.[165] This spatio-temporal packaging is the work of our own minds—specifically the sensibility (*Sinnlichkeit*). In the absence of sensibility, a world exists, to be sure, but it is inaccessible to us as anything other than a manifold (*Mannigfaltiges*) or disordered array of 'undetermined objects' (*unbestimmte Gegenstände*).

The sensibility thus serves for Kant as a sort of gateway through which some of reality can pass—that part of reality that is capable at least of being represented in space and time. This is the *phenomenal* world, and about it, as we will see in a moment, Kant thinks it is indeed possible for us to know plenty. What remains beyond space and time is the *noumenal* world—a world of 'things in themselves'—about which, Kant thinks, it is impossible to know anything. Nevertheless, like a good Platonist, he affirms that, just because we cannot, strictly speaking, *know* anything about the supersensible world, we need not despair that we might not be able to say something *truthful* about it. I will have more to say about this point in a moment.

The role of the sensibility is to represent the manifold as discrete intuitions that we can *apprehend*; but, we do not actually *comprehend* those intuitions—we are not actually *thinking*—until they are represented in relation to concepts (*Begriffe*).[166] This additional conceptual packaging is the work of the understanding (*Verstand*). The understanding unifies intuitions with concepts to form cognitions, which are finally served up to the faculty of reason (*Vernunft*) which uses them to form propositions. Propositions are then submitted before laws (*Principien*, *Grundsätze*) of logical inference, validity and coherence. Only at this point are we in a position to evaluate objects of cognition as true or false—that is, to make judgements.

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[165] When I use 'intuition' without qualification, I mean *empirical* intuition. *Pure* intuitions, for Kant, to refer to the *a priori* representations of space and time themselves.
[166] A69; B94: "[U]nderstanding […] is […] a faculty for thinking. Thinking is cognition through concepts."

While Kant's analysis of cognition itself is relatively novel, with respect to the assessment of the truth of propositions it is worth appreciating, especially from a Catholic perspective, the extent to which Kant operates within parameters that Aquinas would recognize as traditional. Like Aquinas, Kant recognizes three distinct ways of 'holding as true' (*Fürwahrhalten)*: knowledge (*episteme*, *scientia, Wissen*), faith (*pistis*, *fides, Glaube*) and opinion (*doxa*, *opinio, Meinung*).[167] I have an opinion, Aquinas thinks, when I can, faced with a contradictory claim, affirm one of them only "with some fear that the other is true."[168] Such fear is perfectly rational, expressive of a lack of certainty. One who holds an opinion has indeed made a kind of choice, *viz.* to treat one claim as true and the other false; but, an opinion is not *grounded* in my will (*voluntas*, *Willkür*, *Wille*). With respect to my opinions, I am always afraid, to some degree, that I might be wrong, and so I reserve the right, so to speak, to change my mind.

When I claim to know something, such fear is banished— I affirm knowledge claims "without reservation." Like opinion, however, this affirmation does not involve an act of will. The heavy lifting is being done by "definitions of the terms" and "demonstrations." Insofar as the will is involved, its freedom is not really at issue—a rational being has 'no choice' but to acquiesce to the evidence presented by means of a cogent analysis or valid demonstration. When we know something to be true, our will is relaxed or in some sense disengaged. To be sure, our will might be highly engaged when it comes to defining terms or dreaming up demonstrations; but, when it comes specifically to the act of holding as true, the evidence effectively 'speaks for itself.' Knowledge is certain for everyone (*Gewißheit für jedermann*) insofar as what is demonstrably true does not depend much, if at all, upon a volitional contribution from me, the *subject* holding it to be true.

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[167] Insole suggests that Kant likely inherited the *Wissenschaft*/*Glauben*/*Meinungen* trio indirectly by way of Leibniz's French commentary on Heinrich Engelhard Poley's German translation (1757) of Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*, itself based upon a translation (into French) by Pierre Coste. See Christopher J. Insole, "Free Belief: The Medieval Heritage in Kant's Moral Faith," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 57, no. 3 (2019): 501-528. See also F. Andrew Brown, "German Interest in John Locke's 'Essay' 1688-1800," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 50, no. 4 (Oct. 1951): 466-482.

[168] This section relies on Aquinas's analysis in *De veritate,* Q. 14, a. 1. trans. James V. McGlynn, S. J. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953). Parallel readings: *III Sent*., 23, 2, 2, sol. 1; *Ad Hebr*., c. 11, lect. 1; ST, II-II, q. 2, a 1.

Things are different when it comes to faith, which yields only conviction for myself (*Überzeugung für mich selbst)*.[169] On the one hand, faith is like knowledge in that the firmness (*firmissime*) of our assent, whether we call it *Gewißheit or Überzeugung,* is in both cases perfect. In other words, we could not assent *more* firmly than we do when we claim to know or to have faith in something. On the other hand, because a claim affirmed by faith is not demonstrable like a knowledge claim – it "does not attain the perfection of clear sight" – one who has faith remains troubled by a lingering "mental unrest" (*cogitationes)* that does not visit upon the one who knows.[170] This restlessness differs from the fear we experience in the case of holding an opinion—it is profound, propelling us toward deeper inquiry. For both Aquinas and Kant, this imperfect element in faith does not count against its *rationality*. While knowledge satisfies in a way faith does not, knowledge alone does not satiate the human appetite for truth. Kant is not looking to replace faith with knowledge, or *vice versa*, but rather to understand their proper domains and to identify criteria with reference to which we might tell irrational from rational faith (*Vernunftglaube*).

Knowledge is not only attainable for Kant; it is attained in natural philosophy. Moral philosophy, on the other hand, can only find its grounding in rational faith. For Kant, what makes faith—or, for that matter, any act of will—rational can be given in a word – freedom – or two words – moral law. In the final analysis, they amount to the same thing.[171] Kant's reflections upon 'moral law' and 'freedom' have in common the insight that our sense of agency is meaningful only if it is possible for us to act on the basis of *reasons* we give ourselves rather than *causes* that originate outside ourselves. Human beings, like all creatures, are vulnerable to

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[169] CPR A822; B850.

[170] ST II-II q. 2 a. 1: "Sed actus iste qui est credere habet firmam adhaesionem ad unam partem, in quo convenit credens cum sciente et intelligente, et tamen eius cognitio non est perfecta per manifestam visionem, in quo convenit cum dubitante, suspicante et opinante." *De Veritate* q. 14, a. 1, ad. 5: "Ad quintum dicendum, quod fides habet aliquid perfectionis, et aliquid imperfectionis. Perfectionis quidem est ipsa firmitas, quae pertinet ad assensum; sed imperfectionis est carentia visionis, ex qua remanet adhuc motus cogitationis in mente credentis. Ex lumine igitur simplici, quod est fides, causatur id quod perfectionis est, scilicet assentire; sed in quantum illud lumen non perfecte participatur, non totaliter tollitur imperfectio intellectus: et sic motus cogitationis in ipso remanet inquietus." See Joseph Pieper, *On Faith: A Philosophical Treatise, in Faith, Hope, Love,* trans. Richard and Clara Winston (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 50-54.

[171] In the *Groundwork*, Kant introduces freedom first to justify belief in morality; in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, he moves in the other direction. Insole concludes that there is no vicious circle in Kant's thought, but rather that Kant is emphasizing different aspects of a non-obvious identity. See Insole, *Kant and the Divine,* 224, where he cites Kant from the opening of his second *Critique*: "freedom in any case is the *ratio essendi* of the moral law, but the moral law the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom."

being 'pushed around' by causes, quite unlike God who, being uncreated, is perfectly free. God does everything for a reason (and nothing for no reason). There is nothing antecedent to God that could possibly cause God to do anything. Acting for reasons is all that God can do; this is not a limitation on God, not from God's perspective, anyway. For Kant, freedom is a matter of 'becoming like God' in this way – increasingly acting for reasons that accord with the moral law, which just is the reason God might give himself for acting the way he does, if God had to justify Himself to us, which, of course, God does not.

Kant is hardly the first thinker to emphasize the importance of freedom to faith (as opposed to emphasizing, say, the obedience suggested by the "slaves of Christ" language of Ephesians 6:5). As we have seen, that grace and freedom mysteriously commingle in the act of faith is a Christian commonplace. Traditionally, however, it is God who takes the initiative. Whatever contribution *we* might make to the endeavor of salvation, through our own habits, force of will and judgements, must be, however significant, nevertheless secondary. In the absence of God's initial grace, our freedom might just as soon lead us toward sin as salvation; in fact, it is almost a sure thing that we will lose our way without grace. Kant sees things differently. So long as the ultimate ground of my conviction remains 'external' to my own will, my faith will be found wanting. This holds for Kant even if the 'external' authority is God himself. Rational faith is a "faith which our reason can develop out of itself."[172] The ultimate (if not *original*) sin for Kant is a consequence of failing to recognize that one is, in fact, ultimately a free and (for Kant, therefore) moral agent.

What are traditionally taken to be articles of Christian faith—the immortality of the soul and the existence of God—are for Kant "postulates of pure practical reason" (*Postulate der reinen praktischen Vernunft*) that we cannot but affirm if we imagine ourselves to be free.[173] Our faith is rational so long as our beliefs do not contradict any of these postulates. There is no ontology (*metaphysica generalis*) grounding rational faith for Kant. In fact, nothing that we hold to be true (knowledge claims included) can be, for Kant, more than *logically* necessary: "[T]he proud name of ontology […] must give way to the more modest title of a transcendental analytic."[174]

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[172] Kant, *Conflict of the Faculties* 7:59.
[173] *CPrR* 2:4, 220.
[174] A247; B304.

Romantic Platonism

The God whose existence is a 'mere' postulate of practical reason can look bloodless, thin and malnourished; and, the immortal soul we are bequeathed by the transcendental analytic can appear vaporous and devoid of personality. This is where the Romantics tend to sink their critical teeth—There is nothing to *love* here. For Christians, who claim to worship a personal God of love, the impersonality of the God of pure practical reason tends to be more of a problem than a solution. The *Frühromantik* reaction to Kant tended to insist that, while I am indeed a moral agent, I am more than a moral agent. Consider Schleiermacher's reflections from his *Soliloquies* (1800) as representative:

> [Kant's] sense of freedom alone did not content me; it gave no meaning to my personality, nor to the peculiar unity of the transient stream of consciousness flowing within me, which urged me to seek something of higher ethical value of which it was the sign. I was not satisfied to view humanity in rough unshapen masses, inwardly altogether alike, and taking transient shape externally only by reason of mutual contact and friction. Thus there dawned upon me what is now my highest intuition. I saw clearly that each man is meant to represent humanity in his own way, combining its elements uniquely, so that it may reveal itself in every mode, and all that can issue from its womb be made actual in the fullness of unending space and time. This thought alone has uplifted me, and set me apart from everything common and untransformed in my surroundings; it has made of me an elect creation of the godhead, rejoicing in a unique form and character.[175]

For Schleiermacher, then, that we are free to follow the moral law is fine and good; but, what ultimately leads us to salvation is the exercise of our freedom in such a manner that we transform ourselves into uncommon, perhaps even unique expressions of God's own creative activity. This is to say that for Schleiermacher, at least here, it is not that Kant goes too far, but rather not far enough, in developing the implications of his own ideas about the nature and importance of freedom.

At the same time, Schleiermacher thinks there is another sense in which Kant goes *too* far in his affirmation of freedom. For Schleiermacher, our sense of agency is not completely

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[175] Horace Leland Friess, ed., *Schleiermacher's Soliloquies: An English Translation of the Monologen* (Chicago: Open Court, 1926), 31.

characterized by freedom. Our moral sense, so to speak, is rooted in a deeper, spiritual sense that Schleiermacher in his *Speeches* calls "a sense and taste for the infinite" (*Sinn und Geschmack für das Unendliche*) and, in his mature thought, "the feeling of absolute dependence" (*Gefühl der schlechthinnigen Abhängigkeit*) he takes to be at the heart of Christian faith.[176] It is a decisive break with Kant, for whom rational faith can depend on nothing besides one's own sense of freedom and the moral law (which are, for Kant, ultimately identical). While something like dependence creeps into Kant's thinking insofar as he allows for submission (*Unterwerfung*) before the moral law, he does not believe that such submission entails compromising one's sense of agency.[177] It just is what perfect freedom rationally requires. Kantian submission is deeply different from "bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (II Cor. 10:3-5). For Kant, even if we were to replace the captivity of sin with the captivity of faith, we would still be in prison, and our lives unacceptably under the influence of an 'external' authority, even if the warden was himself God.

Few are as fastidious as Kant on this point; however, there are moments when Emerson hits a sufficient number of Kantian notes that it gives one pause to consider how close he may in fact come.

> The revelation of Thought takes man out of servitude into freedom. […] The day of days, the great day of the feast of life, is that in which the inward eye opens to the Unity in things, to the omnipresence of law;—sees that what is must be, and ought to be, or is the best. This beatitude dips from on high down on us, and we see. It is not in us so much as we are in it. If the air come to our lungs, we breathe and live; if not, we die. If the light come to our eyes, we see; else not. And if truth come to our mind, we suddenly expand to its dimensions, as if we grew to worlds. We are as lawgivers; we speak for Nature; we prophesy and divine.[178]

Emerson is deliciously ambiguous here—it is unclear whether God or man makes the first move, who is responsible for the opening of the inward eye, for causing beatitude to dip down from on high. Is "Thought" something like what Kant means by practical reason; or, is it a place-holder for the direct involvement of God himself? The answer is not obvious, and I think Emerson

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[176] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers,* translated and edited by Richard Crouter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996 [1799]), 39. *The Christian Faith*, translated and edited by T.N. Tice, C.L. Kelsey and E. Lawler (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016 [1830]).
[177] *CPrR* 5:86.
[178] *Fate*, 415.

knows this. It seems to me that Emerson is inviting us to split the difference between Kant and Schleiermacher by harmonizing the Kantian emphasis on will and moral law with the Romantic emphasis on personality and feeling. What Emerson ends up putting forward is a more traditional, Platonic position that would be at home in the world of Aquinas with his emphasis on the complementarity of knowledge and faith, freedom and grace.

Provided one attends appropriately to the differences between God and man, this Emersonian emphasis on complementarity and inwardness is not obviously inconsistent with the Catholic idea that faith facilitates a sort of 'divine indwelling,' distinct from the love of God itself, developing in tandem with our sense of gratitude for that love.[179] Consider the following from Francis:

> Those who believe are transformed by the love to which they have opened their hearts in faith. By their openness to this offer of primordial love, their lives are enlarged and expanded. "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). "May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith" (Eph 3:17). The self-awareness of the believer now expands because of the presence of another; it now lives in this other and thus, in love, life takes on a whole new breadth. Here we see the Holy Spirit at work. The Christian can see with the eyes of Jesus and share in his mind, his filial disposition, because he or she shares in his love, which is the Spirit. In the love of Jesus, we receive in a certain way his vision.[180]

Absent the explicit references to Jesus, the sentiment expressed here is not obviously at odds with Emerson's sense of things:

> When I think of Reason, of Truth, of Virtue, I cannot conceive them as lodged in your soul and lodged in my soul, but that you and I and all souls are lodged in that; and I may easily speak of that adorable nature, there where only I behold it in my dim experiences, in such terms as shall seem to the frivolous, who dare not fathom their consciousness, as profane. How is a man a man? How can he exist to weave relations, of joy and virtue with other souls, but because he is inviolable, anchored at the centre of Truth and Being? In the ever-returning hour of reflection, he says: "I stand here glad at heart of all the sympathies I can awaken and share, clothing myself with them as with a garment of shelter and beauty, and yet knowing that it is not in the power of all who surround me to

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[179] At the beginning of the 20th century, Leo XIII speaks of the Holy Spirit's "secret indwelling in the souls of the just" in *Divinum illud munus* (1897). Pius XII subsequently in *Mystici corporis* (1943) speaks of "the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our souls." While such formulations are more common in pre-Conciliar writings, they might be making a comeback of sorts with the 'nuptial mysticism' crowd. See Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 193-202.
[180] Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 21.

> take from me the smallest thread I call mine. If all things are taken away, I have still all things in my relation to the Eternal."[181]

Juxtaposed thusly, the Emerson passage reads naturally as an extended rumination on how exactly "the self-awareness of the believer" is transformed by faith. In both cases, faith (a certain kind of taking-as-true) facilitates an understanding of the world from a fresh point of view *that we do not take to be entirely our own*. This is explicitly the point of view of Jesus in the *Lumen Fidei* passage; In Emerson, Jesus becomes "that adorable nature" and is more cryptically symbolized as an 'anchor' "at the centre of Truth and Being." Whereas *Lumen Fidei* speaks plainly of love, Emerson speaks more obliquely of "relations" to be woven and "sympathies" to be shared. Nevertheless, in both cases, there is in the act of faith a stepping beyond oneself into some kind of intimate relationship with a divine being. The answer to Emerson's question "How is a man (really) a man?" is: Only "in my relation to the Eternal." Whatever kind of individualism rests upon such a foundation can hardly be called 'egoism.'[182]

My sense is that Emerson's avoidance of Christocentric language has less to do with any doubts he may have harbored about the divinity of Jesus than with his sense that an obsession with the personality of Jesus had become an obstacle to the development of mature, rational faith in his time. In other words, Jesus had become another 'authority figure' whose authority it would be more productive for Christians, ironically, to resist: "I cannot but think that Jesus Christ will be better loved by being less adored; he has had an unnatural place for ages in human opinions, a place too high for love."[183] Emerson's distinction here between a natural 'love' and unnatural 'adoration' allows us to make an Emersonian point especially plain. The proper object of adoration, we might say, strictly speaking, is the moral law; and, with it, Emerson thinks, Jesus did not enjoy a relationship any more or less special than our own. It remains available to be adored by us as he did.

When we adore freedom, we imitate Christ; and, in doing so, we free ourselves to love (or, at least, to be grateful for) Jesus for his particular virtuosity and expression of the moral law.

> There was a time when Christianity existed in one child. But if the child had been killed by Herod, would the element have been lost? God sends his

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[181] *Character*, 502.
[182] The question, I suppose, is whether this is usefully designated as a kind of *individualism* at all. I touch on this theme in the following chapter.
[183] JMN 4:92-3.

> message, if not by one, then quite as well by another. When the Master of the Universe has ends to fulfil, he impresses his will on the structure of minds.[184]

Thus, for Emerson, we bear the moral imprint of the Incarnation in the structure of our cognition. This does not necessarily mean that in other respects Jesus is, in fact, Christ—a singularity. It means only that in at least one respect—in our sense of freedom, the moral law and all that follows from it—we are already 'like God.' Indeed, Emerson finds this Kantian insight to be one of the advantages of coming of age in the age of Enlightenment:

> By the irresistible maturing of the general mind, the Christian traditions have lost their hold. The dogma of the mystic offices of Christ being dropped, and he standing on his genius as a moral teacher, 'tis impossible to maintain the old emphasis of his personality; and it recedes, as all persons must, before the sublimity of the moral laws.[185]

Emerson's Christology is indeed 'low,' but nothing here is necessarily blasphemous. So long as it does not get in the way of our interpretation of the moral law, the personality of Jesus can remain significant. Moreover, just because 'the Christian traditions' have lost their hold upon our imaginations does not mean that they cannot regain their hold.

That said, there is something decidedly un-Catholic in Emerson's apparent disregard for 'the Christian traditions.' Emerson's confidence in the capacity of Reason to serve as a trustworthy source of moral guidance is such that the Church would seem relegated to play a secondary role, at best, in the economy of salvation. This would spell trouble for a Catholic theology of vocation given that we have established (see Chapter One) that in such a theology the ecclesial call is properly considered as the fundamental vocation within which all other vocations are nested. In Chapter Five (Emerson's Ecclesiology) we will face head-on the question of whether Catholic ideas about authority, tradition and the sacraments might find purchase in Emersonian soil. Before we do so, however, we need to come to terms with the way Emerson understands the place of human agency (the dynamics of grace and freedom) in the created world. We will do this through a close reading of Emerson's *Nature* (1836) in which Emerson synthesizes the insights of his Roman and Parisian epiphanies.

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[184] *The Scholar*, 492; *Character*, 502.
[185] *Worship*, E 1059.

Chapter 4: Emersonian transcendentalism and the vocation of nature

Emerson's *Nature*

In Chapter One, we established what individualism, in its Emersonian inflection, both is and is not, in broad outline, and how it might relate to the idea of vocation and the God who calls. In Chapter Two, we established broad touchstones for understanding vocation as an aspect of salvation and took some tentative steps toward understanding aspects of Emersonian individualism in relation to them. In Chapter Three, we located Emerson within a broad tradition of philosophical theology that cuts across Catholic and Protestant traditions, meeting three 'types' of Platonic imagination – Thomistic, Kantian and Romantic – along the way that we will come to see, in this chapter, as the pallets Emerson uses to paint his distinctive sacramental imagination. Up to this point, in short, we have built a framework to help us interpret Emerson from a Catholic point of view and in a receptively ecumenical spirit. Now, let us put that framework to good use by offering a close reading of Emerson's first major work, *Nature* (1836).

Nature is peculiar among the constituents of Emerson's *ouvre*, in style and form resembling neither the sermons and lectures that precede it, nor the essays for which he is most esteemed. For one thing, Emerson divides none of his other works into chapters, and a reader of *Nature* must decide how seriously to take his *ordo articulorum*. No chapter really stands on its own, although we do know that the eighth chapter, "Spirit," did begin life as a stand-alone essay. When he decided to include "Spirit" as part of *Nature*, Emerson wrote the seventh chapter, "Idealism," as a bridge between it and the sixth chapter, "Discipline." Following Robert Lee Francis, one might view the chapters of *Nature* as four complementary pairs—a chapter in which definitions and classifications develop in a more or less linear and controlled fashion is followed by a chapter featuring speculative, poetic variations on roughly the same themes—point and counterpoint, as it were.[186] Chapters One, Three, Five and Seven – "Introduction," "Commodity," "Language" and "Idealism" belong to the former set; Chapters Two, Four, Six and Eight – "Nature," "Beauty," "Discipline" and "Spirit" – to the latter. While the ninth and

[186] Robert Lee Francis, "The Architectonics of Emerson's Nature," *American Quarterly* 19, No. 1 (Spring, 1967): 39-52.

final chapter, “Prospects,” serves to summarize the whole work, it does so mainly in the form of poetry credited to an unnamed “Orphic poet” who is, in all likelihood, Emerson himself.

My own reading of *Nature* places greatest weight on Chapter Four, “Beauty,” and Chapter Five, “Language.” In them, I think, we find Emerson at his most lucid; at the very least, we find him at his most Catholic.

The weight of the past

Given Emerson’s general reputation for optimism and good cheer, it may seem surprising that his first major work, *Nature*, opens under a pall. Having conspired, perhaps inadvertently, to build the “sepulchres of the fathers” in the shadows of which he and his reader now stand, Emerson sighs: “The forgoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes.”[187] A few years later, in his *Divinity School Address* (1838), Emerson will sum up the predicament thusly:

> Men have come to speak of the revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead. The injury to faith throttles the preacher; and the goodliest of institutions becomes an uncertain and inarticulate voice.[188]

Emerson frames the issue here in explicitly vocational terms—the institutional church has become an insufficiently vocational space in which we find ourselves unable to discern, much less respond robustly to, God’s call. Emerson seeks a communicative God, and faith in such a God, he worries, no longer seems, in this space, tenable. We are thus in mourning as *Nature* opens, in a cemetery or aside a hospital bed, and the loss with which we are threatened is a profound one—the death (and if not the death, the sickness unto death) of God himself.

It does not take long, however, for Emerson to recover his confidence, as the tone of *Nature* shifts abruptly from lamentation to interrogation:

- Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?
- Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?

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[187] *Nature*, 34. See John T. Matteson, “Grave Discussions: The Image of the Sepulchre in Webster, Emerson, and Melville," *New England Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (2001): 419-46.
[188] *Divinity School Address*, 117. The Nietzschean overtones are no coincidence. See George J. Stack, *Nietzsche and Emerson: An Elective Affinity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992).

- [W]hy should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe?

These questions are rhetorical; in fact, they are not really questions at all. They are imperatives—normative claims disguised as questions. We *should* enjoy an original relation to the universe. We *should* have a poetry and philosophy of insight. We *should not* grope among the dry bones. The question becomes: Whence does the normativity flow?

Before answering that question directly, it is worth noting that Emerson does not entertain the possibility that originality, insight and revelation might be truly lost to us, or that, in our shameful state, it might be somehow fitting for us to live like grave robbers or frivolous, shabby people. Emerson's 'ought' implies 'can.' Moreover, Emerson does not disallow that at least some of those who came before us might have enjoyed a connection to God as we now do not, and so it might be right and just to build things like "sepulchers" in their memory. Emerson is not averse to the influence of "biographies, histories and criticism" *tout court.* In fact, Emerson readily acknowledges throughout his career that we are, in some sense, irreducibly historical beings who derive meaning in the present through our connections to those who came before us. As he puts it in one of his later essays:

> Our debt to tradition through reading and conversation is so massive, our protest or private addition so rare and insignificant, - and this commonly on the ground of other reading or hearing, - that, in a large sense, one would say there is no pure originality. All minds quote. Old and new make the warp and woof of every moment. There is no thread that is not a twist of these two strands. By necessity, by proclivity, and by delight, we all quote.[189]

To quote occasionally, here and there, is innocuous enough, even essential; but, to believe that one is obliged to live by 'quotation' alone, to imagine the present as all warp and no woof, is to fail to acknowledge sufficiently the necessity of originality, insight and revelation for salvation. It is to forget that, in the words of Benedict XVI, "human history is movement and ascent, a continuing tension towards fullness, towards human happiness, towards a horizon that always transcends the present moment even as the two coincide."[190] In *Nature*, Emerson wants to restore a kind of balance between our retrospective and prospective moods.

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[189] *Quotation and Originality*, W 8:170.
[190] Meeting With Artists, Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Sistine Chapel, Saturday, 21 November 2009. https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/november/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20091121_artisti.html (last accessed May 29, 2023).

Emerson's "sepulchers" recall the pyramids; his reference to "dry bones" recalls the prophet Ezekiel. At the opening of *Nature*, then, we find ourselves, with Emerson, whether in Egypt or Babylon, not only in mourning but also in exile, one of God's traditional punishments for the People of Israel when they have fallen under the influence of sin. While sin is not a word that appears in *Nature*, the idea serves as the essay's unspoken center of gravity—a "sepulcher" is, if nothing else, a very weighty thing (see Chapter Two on the metaphor 'sin is a weight.') It calls attention to itself, a demand with which one must reckon. As we have previously remarked, the sin with which Emerson is most concerned is what we might call the sin of agency unrealized or misspent, or the sin of resignation, the source of which, in *Nature*, has something to do with the way in which we "retrospect." It has something to do with our relationship to the past, with nostalgia, with the weight of our memories.

The original sin— that is, the sin that blocks us from originality— is, for Emerson, not that we are being overtly forgetful; it is, rather, that we are not remembering the right things in the right way. We have not forgotten about God *per se*; rather, we have forgotten who God really is and how to imagine the right relationship between God and creation. God as we have come to imagine him is no longer God in his fullness, perfection and plenitude. He is God stripped of key Platonic attributes, and, for Emerson, this does not serve us in our pursuit of vocational discernment.

As an antidote, Emerson would have us recall a fundamental truth: "Nature is made to conspire with spirit to emancipate us."[191] In other words, the created world exists, in some deeply important sense, *for the sake of* our salvation. Such is the basis of a 'natural' Christianity, the contours of which, I think, is what *Nature* offers its reader. *Nature* proposes a corrective to the practice of what, in the *Divinity School Address*, Emerson will come to call "Historical Christianity," which obscures the extent to which salvation is a natural process—an ongoing event in the present, initiated in time by a divine agent but in which human agency continues to have a role to play, perhaps decisively so.

There are two ways of looking at Emerson's concern here. One concern is that by being forgetful we risk being ungrateful—and, as we have indicated (in Chapter Two), gratitude is the proper Christian response to a sense of having received a gift. This is a perennial Christian

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[191] *Nature*, 55.

concern, that in failing to acknowledge appropriately the ultimate gift of grace, the engine of salvation cannot generate any forward momentum. Growth in faith thus is stymied. The other concern is the tendency to forget our freedom. It is more distinctively Emersonian, although it, too, is perennial—a major if not dominant theme in the Christian tradition.

Emerson's concern that living too much in the shadows of the past might jeopardize our sense of agency in the present mirrors a concern to which Francis gives voice in his apostolic exhortation on the universal call to holiness.

> We should not grow discouraged before examples of holiness that appear unattainable. There are some testimonies that may prove helpful and inspiring, but that we are not meant to copy, for that could even lead us astray from the one specific path that the Lord has in mind for us. The important thing is that each believer discern his or her own path, that they bring out the very best of themselves, the most personal gifts that God has placed in their hearts (cf. 1 Cor. 12:7), rather than hopelessly trying to imitate something not meant for them. We are all called to be witnesses, but there are many actual ways of bearing witness.[192]

What both Emerson and Francis seek to free us (save us) from is an overwhelming sense of our 'fallenness' especially in relation to the moral exemplars, to say nothing of the saints, who have come before us. When the heights that must be scaled in pursuit of salvation appear so daunting that we resign ourselves to believing that salvation is either entirely a matter of grace, or that the degree of discipline required for salvation is simply unavailable to anyone other than the elite or fortunate few, the very idea of salvation becomes a burden, an engine of sin instead of faith.

The end of nature

Emerson thinks that it is within our power, at least to a very great degree, to escape from sin, at least the present state of sin in which we find ourselves, by changing the way we think about God, creation and the relationship between them.

> 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. Every man's condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put. He acts it as life, before he apprehends it as truth. In like manner, nature is already, in its forms and

[192] Francis. *Gaudete et exsultate*, 11.

> tendencies, describing its own design. Let us interrogate the great apparition, that shines so peacefully around us. Let us inquire, to what end is nature?[193]

This is the first genuine question in *Nature*, one that presumes what Thomas and the majority of scholastic thinkers took to be self-evident—to wit, every agent acts for an end, and nature is properly thought of as a kind of agent.[194] Aquinas uses the terms *agens* and *agere* in a broad sense to designate anything that acts intrinsically *for the sake of* something definite. He does not assume that only human beings are agents in the proper sense of the term; however, insofar as all created beings intrinsically tend toward a definite end, their activities can be understood profitably by analogy to purposive human action. In other words, all of nature is, as human nature is, imbued with finality.

Because the created world of nature participates in, however imperfectly, the unlimited act of creation that is God, God is, to some degree, intelligible. Rom. 1:20 serves as a common scriptural touchstone: "Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made."[195] Augustine cites the verse in *De doctrina Christiana*, adding the gloss: "by means of what is material and temporary we may lay hold upon that which is spiritual and eternal."[196] His view is echoed by John Scottus Eriugena (810-877) in the *Periphyseon*: "there is no visible or corporeal thing which is not the symbol of something incorporeal and intelligible."[197]

For Emerson, too, nature has a symbolic function. The natural order, in fact, is structured like a language, a "picturesque" or "sign" language whence the significance of human signifiers flows.

> A man conversing in earnest, if he watch his intellectual processes, will find that always a material image, more or less luminous, arises in his mind, cotemporaneous with every thought, which furnishes the vestment of the thought. Hence, good writing and brilliant discourse are perpetual allegories. This imagery is spontaneous. It is the blending of experience with the present action of the mind. It is proper creation. It is the working of the Original Cause through the instruments he has already made.[198]

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[193] *Nature*, 35.
[194] *Summa contra Gentiles*, Book 3, q. 2, Par. 6: "Omne agens agit propter finem"
[195] "Invisibilia enim ipsius, a creatura mundi, per ea quae facta sunt, intellecta, conspiciuntur: sempiterna quoque eius virtus, et divinitas."
[196] Augustine. *De doctrina christiana*, Book 1, ch. 4: "[…] si redire in patriam volumus, ubi beati esse possimus, utendum est hoc mundo, non fruendum, ut invisibilia Dei, per ea quae facta sunt, intellecta conspiciantur."
[197] Erigena, *Periphyseon (The Division of Nature),* translated by I. P. Sheldon, revised by John O'Meara (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1987): 529 (865D-866A).
[198] *Nature*, 46.

Nature, then, is the common ground upon which human agents might reasonably base their hopes for agreement and mutual understanding, an "interpreter, by whose means man converses with his fellow men."[199] In another sense, however, nature signifies the divine—just as nature serves to ground the meaning of human language, God serves as the ultimate ground of the language of nature. Emerson puts it schematically in the opening of Chapter Five of *Nature*:

1. Words are signs of natural facts.
2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.
3. Nature is the symbol of Spirit.[200]

This arrangement ensures the ultimate intelligibility of God; but, by introducing creation as a language-like medium between the human and divine minds, it ensures that we will always be practically challenged by conflicting translations, interpretations and the limits of language itself. Emerson offers no reason to think that interpreting precisely what Spirit is saying in and through the language of nature should be a straightforward affair. On the contrary, for Emerson, "[w]ords are finite organs of the infinite mind. They cannot cover the dimensions of what is in truth. They break, chop, and impoverish it."[201]

> Of that ineffable essence which we call Spirit, he that thinks most, will say least. We can foresee God in the coarse and, as it were, distant phenomena of matter; but when we try to define and describe himself, both language and thought desert us, and we are as helpless as fools and savages.[202]

This sort of apophaticism, rooted in the idea of nature as a kind of medium 'doubly related' to two intellects—the *intellectus divinus*, on the one hand, to which nature is perfectly intelligible, and the *intellectus humanus*, its imperfect analog, lacking in its capacity to represent the original, creative knowledge of God, on the other—is not exactly uncommon across the Christian tradition. It is the often-overlooked complement to the more cataphatic approaches to God and creation for which medieval scholasticism, especially, is most remembered.

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[199] *Nature*, 45.
[200] *Nature*, 41.
[201] *Nature*, 53.
[202] *Nature*, 61. See also L 416, Emerson's letter (no. 318) to Mary Rotch (1847): "I never willingly say anything concerning "God" in cold blood, though I think we all have very just insights when we are "in the mount," as our fathers used to say. In conversation sometimes, or to humility & temperance the cloud will break away to show at least the direction of the rays of absolute Being, and we see the truth that lies in every affirmation men have made concerning it, & at the same time the cramping partiality of their speech. For the science of God our language is unexpressive, & merely prattle: we need simpler & universal signs, as algebra compared with arithmetic."

Even though human language is not entirely up to the task of translating the language of the divine, we can, Emerson thinks, with supreme effort, manage a degree of understanding insofar as we bring our words—our thoughts and the actions our thoughts inspire—into accord with nature.

> A life in harmony with nature, the love of truth and of virtue, will purge the eyes to understand her text. By degrees we may come to know the primitive sense of the permanent objects of nature, so that the world shall be to us an open book, and every form significant of its hidden life and final cause.[203]

The underlying metaphor here is a classic one: 'nature is a book' (*liber naturae*, *liber mundi*, or *liber creaturae*). The Book of Nature serves to supplement, if not replace, the revelations of Scripture. The metaphor likely originates with Augustine and was given new life by Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) and Hugh of St. Victor (1096-1141).[204] Bonaventure (1217-1274) and Aquinas make use of it, and subsequent notables such as Thomas of Chobham (1255-1327), Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), Thomas a Kempis (1380-1471) and Raymond of Sebond (1385-1436) did not shy away from its use. Nor has the pontifical Magisterium since Vatican II. In *Fides et ratio* (1998), John Paul II refers to the "marvelous book of nature" as a first stage of divine Revelation […] which, when read with the proper tools of human reason, can lead to knowledge of the Creator."[205] Benedict XVI refers to the book of nature as "one and indivisible" in his encyclical *Caritas in veritate* (2009); and, in addition to comparing the cosmos to a "book" and "the work of an author" in the post-synodal exhortation *Verbum Domini* (2010), he states: "While the Christ event is at the heart of divine revelation, we also need to realize that creation itself, the *liber naturae*, is an essential part of this symphony of many voices in which the one

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[203] *Nature*, 48.

[204] There are two texts in which Augustine uses the book metaphor as expressing the parallelism of Scripture and nature. The clearest of them is contained in *Sermon* 68 on the New Testament. The other is in the *Answer to Faustus*. On these, as well as some other metaphors and expressions that misleadingly resemble the book of nature, see Oskari Juurikkala, "The Two Books of God: The Metaphor of the Book of Nature in Augustine," *Augustinianum* 61/2 (2021): 479-498.

[205] cf. John Paul II, *General Audiences*, August 2, 2000: "Along with revelation properly so-called, contained in Sacred Scripture, there is a divine manifestation in the blaze of the sun and the fall of night. Nature too, in a certain sense, is 'the book of God'" and January 30, 2002: "[F]or those who have attentive ears and open eyes, creation is like a first revelation that has its own eloquent language: it is almost another sacred book whose letters are represented by the multitude of created things present in the universe."

word is spoken."[206] In his encyclical *Laudato si* (2015), Francis affirms: "God has written a precious book whose letters are the multitude of created things present in the universe."[207]

Emerson's way of speaking about the significance of nature recalls the way in which the Christian tradition speaks about the sacraments. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that a sacrament is:

- both a sign and instrument of God's grace (CCC 1103-9)
- the mystery of God's love for humankind made manifest (CCC 776)
- a means of communion between God and humankind (CCC 773)

A sacrament is not just any sign but a sacred sign, a symbol that not only informs but also forms us by the grace of God. A sacrament threatens to make us more *like* God. Within a Platonic imagination in which all creation to some degree participates in the perfection of the divine, there is no good reason to deny that nature is, to some degree, sacred. The sacramentality of nature can only be a matter of degree, not kind.

That some symbols are worthy of special respect, and that their integration into formal sacraments might be instrumental to one's vocational discernment and ultimate salvation, are claims few Christians would wish to dispute; nevertheless, on neither the number nor precise nature of the sacraments have Christians ever seen fit to agree. At the Council of Trent (1547) Catholics confirmed seven sacraments, an arrangement that persists to this day, but there is only something resembling agreement among all Christians about the sacramentality of two of them (Baptism, Eucharist); and, even here, there remain considerable differences in the way they are rendered liturgically.[208] There are even some Christians who do not acknowledge these traditional Christian practices as *sacraments* at all, notably George Fox and the Quakers, who heavily influenced Emerson's thinking on these matters.[209]

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[206] *Caritas in veritate* (2009) cf. n. 51; *Verbum Domini* (2010) n. 7, 13. cf. Benedict XVI, *Discourse to the Roman Curia*, December 22, 2005; *Discourse to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences*, October 31, 2008; *Homily on the Solemnity of the Epiphany*, Rome, January 6, 2009; *Message to the participants to the Conference "From Galileo's telescope to evolutionary cosmology,"* Rome, November 26, 2009; *Message for the World day of Peace: "If you want to cultivate peace, protect creation,"* December 8, 2009; General Audience, March 24, 2010; *Discourse to the General Assembly of the Italian Bishops Conference*, May 27, 2010; *Homily in the Church of the "Sagrada Familia,"* Barcelona, November 7, 2010; General Audience, February 6, 2013.
[207] *Laudato Si* n. 85. cf. nn. 6, 11, 12, 239). cf. *Homily on the Solemnity of Epiphany*, Rome, January 6, 2014.
[208] The first time these seven were listed in the documents of an ecumenical council occurred at Second Council of Lyons (1274).
[209] Evangelical and Pentecostal traditions tend to refer to Baptism and the Eucharist as ordinances, not sacraments, since strictly speaking they do not serve to impart grace but rather to express faith.

Emerson follows in the footsteps of those English Puritans who, perhaps not as radically as Fox, joined Luther and Calvin in the general 'downgrading' of the sacraments as means of salvation in the wake of the 'faith vs. works' controversy of the 16th century.[210] While some uncharitable Protestants still assess Catholic sacramental practice to be so much theurgy, most tend to view the sacraments simply as superfluous; helpful, perhaps, but fundamentally unnecessary for salvation and, in most cases, a distraction. Emerson falls into this camp. Still, he, like most Protestants, tends to agree wholeheartedly with Catholics that salvation is a deeply mysterious process whether or not the sacraments themselves can help us approach that mystery in meaningful ways. Common across the Christian traditions is the belief that the reality of salvation – our perfect realization of the magnitude of what has been accomplished *for us* through the incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – transcends our ordinary categories of understanding. This is where the sacraments come in—*sacramentus* just is the Latin word for the Greek *mysterium*.[211] The sacraments are intended to help us wrap our minds and hearts around the ultimately incomprehensible mystery who is the God who calls.

The idea that simply thinking about one's salvation is not enough, that salvation is something that needs to be embodied – ingested, digested – before it can begin to be properly understood, is perhaps one reason why, in the Christian imagination, the mystery of salvation is almost always presented as having some sort of special affinity with the ritualistic consumption of food. Catholics especially emphasize this practice—for them the Eucharist is "the Sacrament of sacraments" in which "the Church's whole liturgy finds its center and most intense expression."[212] Even the Protestant reformers mostly preserved the practice of sharing bread and wine while at the same time marking their difference from Catholics by referring to that practice not as 'the Eucharist' but rather as 'The Lord's Supper.'

The liberal theologians in whose footsteps Emerson followed treated the sharing of bread and wine only or primarily as a commemorative ceremony.

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[210] That controversy centered around the reconciliation of St. Paul's claims (Romans, 4:2,3,13; Ephesians 2:8-9) that one is 'justified by faith' (*per iustitiam fidei)* and St. James's claim (James 2:24) that it is not by faith alone but by works that one is justified (*ex operibus iustificatur homo et non ex fide tantum*). Catholics tend to side with St. James, while Protestants swear fealty to St. Paul (I oversimplify).

[211] LG 48; CCC 774.

[212] CCC 1330; cf. "[T]he Eucharist makes the Church." Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages*, trans. Gemma Simmonds (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2006), 88.

> Many persons consider this fact, the observance of such a memorial feast by the early disciples, decisive of the question whether it ought to be observed by us. For my part I see nothing to wonder at in its originating there; all that is surprising is that it should exist amongst us. It had great propriety for his personal friends to remember their friend and repeat his words. It was but too probable that among the half-converted Pagans and Jews any rite, any form would be cherished whilst yet unable to comprehend the spiritual character of Christianity.[213]

Emerson's main argument against the practice of the Lord's Supper is rooted in its lack of connection to the spirit of his place and time. His objection is less doctrinal than pragmatic.

> We are not accustomed to express our thoughts or emotions by symbolical actions. Most men find the bread and wine no aid to devotion and to some persons it is an impediment. To eat bread is one thing; to love the precepts of Christ and resolve to obey them is quite another. It is of the greatest importance that whatever forms we use should be animated by our feelings; that our religion through all its acts should be living and operative.[214]

Whereas for Fox, the Lord's Supper threatened to distract us from the ubiquitous and personal presence of Christ and the absolute need to cultivate our relationship with him, for Emerson it threatens to distract us from the "precepts of Christ," the moral law that Christ so perfectly embodied.

Emerson's resistance to the Lord's Supper is not rooted in a more general hostility to formal religious practice or 'organized' religion *per se*. 'Forms' are fine so far as they go.

> Forms are as essential as bodies. It would be foolish to declaim against them, but to adhere to one form a moment after it is outgrown is foolish. […] I am not engaged to Christianity by decent forms; it is not saving ordinances, it is not usage, it is not what I do not understand that engages me to it—let these be the sandy foundation of falsehoods. What I revere and obey in it is its reality, its boundless charity, its deep interior life, the rest it gives to my mind, the echo it returns to my thoughts, the perfect accord it makes with my reason, the persuasion and courage that come out of it to lead me upward and onward.[215]

When the 'decent forms' of Christianity—its tropes and conventions—fail to 'lead me upward and onward,' they cease to be sacraments, properly speaking, and they ought to be cast aside, or at least not held in any special reverence. Such is no great loss for Emerson, for whom the signs

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[213] *The Lord's Supper*, 6.
[214] *The Lord's Supper*, 9.
[215] *The Lord's Supper*, 9.

and instruments of God's grace are myriad and well distributed in this world. He sees no good reason that sacraments should be limited to the liturgical context or that we ought to fixate on one particular set of signs to the exclusion of all others.

That some set of signs might be *preferred* to others, however, is a position to which Emerson is open. If we are to have sacraments, Emerson thinks, they should not simply serve to mystify; rather, their mysteriousness should energize and help to reveal a path 'onward' into the deeper mystery toward which they ultimately point. This is precisely what the *sacramentality* of a sign consists of.

True sacraments must also be more than mere remembrances. They may look backward, but they must also propel us 'upward and onward,' allowing us at least to approach knowledge of God, even if such knowledge ultimately remains beyond our grasp. For Emerson, what is sacramental would help to orient us to the creative act of being such that we might more readily become open to "the exertions of a power which exists not in time or space, but an instantaneous in-streaming causing power."[216] True sacraments, by enhancing our connection to God, would generate moral energy and normative force. By their means, God might call us 'upward and onward.'

Emerson's gripe is with fixed sacramental forms that one no longer experiences as 'gifts' but rather as 'givens' to which one is expected to *conform*. Such mindless conformity gets in the way of one's growth in faith, effectively closing us off to the *ongoing* mystery of grace—to sacramentality as such.

> Faith makes us, and not we it, and faith makes its own forms. All attempts to contrive a system are as cold as the new worship introduced by the French to the goddess of Reason—to-day, pasteboard and fillagree, and ending to-morrow in madness and murder. Rather let the breath of new life be breathed by you through the forms already existing. For, if once you are alive, you shall find they shall become plastic and new. The remedy to their deformity is, first, soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul. A whole popedom of forms, one pulsation of virtue can uplift and vivify.[217]

Form follows faith, as it were, and faith is always in flux, unsettled and restless (*cogitatio*) by its very nature. What the disciples did with the Passover meal is what we are called to do now—

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[216] *Nature*, 67.
[217] *Divinity School Address*, 125.

transform the meaning of what has become merely formal such that it takes on a new energy, thereby becoming truly *sacramental*. Just beneath the surface, then, of Emerson's query into the end of nature, is the question: How should we imagine the world such that it becomes, for us, a sacrament? Or, said negatively: What have we forgotten about the world such that it has ceased to function for us as a sacrament?

Beauty revealed

For Emerson, as for Aquinas, the relationship between the divine and human agents, while not utterly different from the relationship other created, non-human agents enjoy with the divine, is indeed special.

> All other organizations appear to be degradations of the human form. When this organization appears among so many that surround it, the spirit prefers it to all others. It says, 'From such as this, have I drawn joy and knowledge. In such as this, have I found and beheld myself. I will speak to it.[218]

All created agents enjoy an *analogical* relationship to the uncreated, divine agent; but, the relationship between divine and human agency is also expressly *vocational*.[219] God speaks to man, not only directly, through a special revelation as Emerson would seem to allow, but also, and perhaps mainly, through the general revelation of creation itself. The created world thus stands to the human agent not simply as a medium for divine self-communication; creation *is* divine self-communication.

> Through all its kingdoms, to the suburbs and outskirts of things, [nature] is faithful to the cause whence it had its origin. It always speaks of Spirit. It suggests the absolute. It is a perpetual effect. It is a great shadow pointing always to the sun behind us. […] [T]he noblest ministry of nature is to stand as the apparition of God. It is the great organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual, and strives to lead back the individual to it.[220]
>
> What noble emotions dilate the mortal as he enters into the counsels of the creation, and feels by knowledge the privilege to BE! His insight refines him. The beauty of nature shines in his own breast.[221]

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[218] *Nature*, 53.
[219] On the analogy of being in general, see Steven A. Long, *Analogia Entis: On the Analogy of Being, Metaphysics and the Act of Faith* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press), 2011.
[220] *Nature*, 61.
[221] *Nature*, 50.

Thus, it is specifically in the beauty of natural forms, including our own human form, Emerson would have us believe the divine being is, to some degree, being revealed. All that is beautiful is at least potentially sacramental.

In extraordinary moments, nature reveals to us such beauty that the distinction between the perceiver and perception becomes clouded, a consequence of which is a sense of being overwhelmed by the beauty of creation. This comes across in one of Emerson's most infamous passages as a sort of 'resetting' of our being as we come into direct contact with the divine.

> In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befal me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental. To be brothers, to be acquaintances,—master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty.[222]

For Emerson, beauty that is "seen and felt" in response to our "simple perception of natural forms" is a sign of beauty that is "uncontained and immortal."

> Beauty, in its largest and profoundest sense, is one expression for the universe. God is the all-fair. Truth, and goodness, and beauty, are but different faces of the same All.[223]

Such uncreated beauty pertains to "the absolute order of things as they stand in the mind of God."[224] In fact, in Chapter 4 of *Nature*, Emerson nominates 'beauty' as a fitting word for the "ultimate end" toward which all of creation ultimately tends.

Emerson calls beauty a "general grace diffused over nature."[225] While I think that beauty indeed does serve Emerson as a proxy for grace, it is actually something more than this. It serves, more often than not, as a proxy for being itself. My suggestion is that we elevate our understanding of Emerson's theological commitments when we take beauty to function for Emerson similarly to the way it often functions in the Catholic tradition – to wit, as a transcendental (*transcendere*). A transcendental is a "necessary note of being" that recurs in all

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[222] *Nature*, 37.
[223] *Nature*, 43.
[224] *Nature*, 42.
[225] *Nature*, 39.

beings as such.[226] There are at least three other transcendentals: unity, truth and goodness.[227] The Catholic tradition teaches that transcendental beauty is less an individual note of being than a chord consisting of these three notes of being in "the fullness of their diversity and harmony."[228]

Thomas's explication of the transcendentals, along with his analysis of substance and his doctrine of participation, provides a basis not only for a proof of God's existence but also insight via analogy as to who God is. While he goes about things in a far less thorough and systematic way, Emerson has goals no less ambitious in *Nature*: It contains his metaphysics in outline, upon which we are encouraged to build a robust and personal account of our own faith in God. In short, Emerson is indeed properly thought of as a "transcendentalist," but not in an exclusively Kantian sense of that term. My sense is that our Catholic Emerson might emerge as we re-arrange the themes of *Nature* and examine them under the aspects of each transcendental.

Transcendental beauty

Emerson teaches that delight in the transcendental beauty of creation quickens our salvation, and "that the power to produce this delight, does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both."[229] Let us suppose that what Emerson means here by 'harmony' is analogous to what Aquinas means by unity.[230] Following Aquinas, we can say that any being has unity insofar as it is essentially undivided (*indivisum in se*).[231] What is essentially undivided is said to be some *one* thing—something (*aliquid*) and not something else (*aliud quid*).[232] It has an

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[226] *De verit.* q. 1, a.1 speaks of some modes of being (*modus entis*) that are "common, and consequent upon every being (*generalis consequens omne ens*)." It is commonly presumed that Aquinas here is referring to what in other places he calls *transcendentia* and *prima entia*. See *De virtutibus in communi* 1.2 ad. 8 and *De potentia* 9.7 o. 6, respectively.

[227] Aristotle's main examinations of truth and unity are in *Metaphysics* VI and X, respectively, and of the good in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I. Augustine speaks of beauty very much like a transcendental in his *Confessions* and in Books XX-XXII of *De civitas Dei*. While Aquinas does not explicitly claim that beauty is a transcendental, the Catholic tradition treats Thomas as having treated it is such. For a survey of neo-scholastic considerations of whether beauty is rightly taken to be a transcendental, see Francis J. Kovach, "Beauty as a Transcendental," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd edition (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2008).

[228] SM 6:286.

[229] *Nature*, 37.

[230] I recognize that one might reasonably object that 'harmony' and 'unity' are not perfectly convertible; however, it is difficult for me to imagine that they are not imperfectly so, and so I treat them as at least analogous terms.

[231] "Negatio autem consequens omne ens absolute, est indivisio; et hanc exprimit hoc nomen unum: nihil aliud enim est unum quam ens indivisum."

[232] *De veritate* q. 1, a. 1: "Non autem invenitur aliquid affirmative dictum absolute quod possit accipi in omni ente, nisi essentia eius, secundum quam esse dicitur."

identity. For God, the whole of creation is one thing. In the pure act of being—the creative act of God, the act that *is* God—existence and essence constitute a perfect unity. They are one as nothing else is one. God is as nothing else is. All other beings participate in that perfect unity imperfectly, their existence limited to varying degrees by their essence. Composite beings enjoy unity to the same degree as they are actual (*in actu*). In such moments as we discern notes of actual unity among created beings, Emerson thinks, we rightly delight in the beauty of nature.

> [A]lthough the works of nature are innumerable and all different, the result or the expression of them all is similar and single. Nature is a sea of forms radically alike and even unique. A leaf, a sun-beam, a landscape, the ocean, make an analogous impression on the mind. What is common to them all,—that perfectness and harmony, is beauty. Therefore the standard of beauty, is the entire circuit of natural forms,—the totality of nature; which the Italians expressed by defining beauty "*il piu nell' uno*." Nothing is quite beautiful alone: nothing but is beautiful in the whole. A single object is only so far beautiful as it suggests this universal grace.[233]

Emerson here treats unity and beauty as Thomas might; that is, as terms expressing the being-in-common (*ens commune*) enjoyed by all beings, and as convertible with (not really distinct from) each other. This is exactly what should be the case if unity and beauty are functioning as transcendentals for Emerson.

When existence overwhelms essence—that is, when the sense *that* one is (a sense of what Emerson calls 'the privilege to BE!') takes precedence over the sense of *what* or *who* one is—the unity of creation is experienced as a beautiful, if disorienting and weird, loss of personal identity, as Emerson reflects in a passage reminiscent of his earlier invocation of the 'transparent eye-ball':

> I have seen the spectacle of morning from the hill-top over against my house, from day-break to sun-rise, with emotions which an angel might share. The long slender bars of cloud float like fishes in the sea of crimson light. From the earth, as a shore, I look out into that silent sea. I seem to partake its rapid transformations: the active enchantment reaches my dust, and I dilate and conspire with the morning wind.[234]

Such experiences of unity tend to be largely beyond our control; they are mainly gifted to us.

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[233] *Nature*, 43.
[234] *Nature*, 40, 52.

> The shows of day, the dewy morning, the rainbow, mountains, orchards in blossom, stars, moonlight, shadows in still water, and the like, if too eagerly hunted, become shows merely, and mock us with their unreality. Go out of the house to see the moon, and 'tis mere tinsel; it will not please as when its light shines upon your necessary journey. The beauty that shimmers in the yellow afternoons of October, who ever could clutch it? Go forth to find it, and it is gone: 'tis only a mirage as you look from the windows of diligence.[235]

Occasional and somewhat fickle, our experiences of the transcendental unity of creation are real enough, but precious and short lived. They come and go with our moods and tend to visit us, not we them; in fact, we are hardly capable of experiencing such unity *at will*. It is something that tends to happen to us when we are not really trying to do anything in particular. Transcendental unity is akin to divine grace in this respect.

A penchant for unity is reflected in Kant's use of the term 'synthesis' to designate the type of combinatory act (*Verbindung*) responsible for the very possibility of experience as such. It is by means of unifying acts of synthesis that intuitions are first formed and then "gone through, taken up, and combined" in order to form concepts and judgments.[236] In terms of the Kantian imagination, transcendental unity is most evidently related to sensibility and the synthesis of apprehension; but, it is also related to the faculties of understanding and reason and their corresponding syntheses of reproduction and recognition.[237]

> It comes along with our nature that intuition can never be other than sensible, i.e., that it contains only the way in which we are affected by objects. The faculty for thinking of objects of sensible intuition, on the contrary, is the understanding. Neither of these properties is to be preferred to the other. Without sensibility no object would be given to us, and without understanding none would be thought. Thoughts without content (*Inhalt*) are empty (*leer*), intuitions without concepts are blind. It is thus just as necessary to make the mind's concepts sensible (i.e., to add an object to them in intuition) as it is to make its intuitions understandable (i.e., to bring them under concepts). Further, these two faculties or capacities cannot exchange their functions. The understanding is not capable of intuiting anything, and the senses are not capable of thinking anything. Only from their unification can cognition arise.[238]

While synthetic unity is fundamental to our experience of the world—of having a world that we can be said to experience—it is not something people are ordinarily aware of doing. It is

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[235] *Nature*, 41.
[236] A77-8; B102-3.
[237] Kant discusses this 'threefold synthesis' at A97-110; B159-61.
[238] A50–51; B74–76.

primarily the work of what Kant calls the imagination (*Einbildungskraft*), "a blind though indispensable function […] of which we are only seldom even conscious."[239] But, in each moment of synthesis, there must correspond, Kant thinks, at least some sense that whatever I am thinking about is not nothing (*i.e.* it is something) to me.[240] This complementarity and interrelatedness of intuitions and concepts (which Kant discusses under the somewhat cumbersome heading of "the original-synthetic unity of apperception") suggests, at least, a primitive 'interestedness' of mind in nature and, perhaps, *vice versa*, and corresponds to what I am calling Emerson's sense of the unity of creation.

With respect to the fundamental importance of a sense of unity, Kant is not so at odds with Thomas, for whom unity, in addition to being considered in its own respect as a transcendental, might also be considered specifically in relation to our intellect (*intellectum*) and will (*appetitum*). Truth is the transcendental subject of the former; Good that of the latter.[241] Let us briefly consider each in isolation.

Truth, according to Aquinas, indicates "the conformity of thing and intellect" (*adaequatio rei et intellectus*).[242] Only with respect to the divine intellect is such conformity perfect. Something (some sense of unity) is always missing *from our point of view*. Still, in a Thomist epistemology, no thought is utterly unrelated to being; and, this relationship between 'being' and its capacity for 'being thought' just is what scholastics tend to mean by 'the truth of being.' The truth of being is its reflective quality, like the albedo of a moon or planet. It is the reflection upon which our intellect finds it fitting to reflect. That reflective act has an impact upon us. It *informs* us.

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[239] In the B edition, Kant seems to attribute all synthesis to the understanding (see, *e.g*., B130, B162fn). Thus, there is a debate as to whether this imaginative synthesis must be guided by the conceptual synthesis of recognition or can occur 'pre-conceptually.' See Michael J. Young, "Kant's View of Imagination," *Kant-Studien* 79, no. 1-4 (1988): 140-164 and Hannah Ginsborg, "Was Kant a Nonconceptualist?" *Philosophical Studies* 137 (2008): 65-77.

[240] B131-2: "The 'I think' must be able to accompany all my representations; for otherwise something would be represented in me that could not be thought at all, which is as much as to say that the representation would either be impossible or else at least would be nothing for me."

[241] *De Ver.,* q. 1, a. 1: "The soul, however, has both knowing and appetitive powers (In anima autem est vis cognitiva et appetitive)." *De Ver*. q. 1, a. 2: "Since good, as mentioned previously, expresses a relation to appetite, and true, a relation to the intellect. (Et quia bonum, sicut dictum est, dicit ordinem entis ad appetitum, verum autem dicit ordinem ad intellectum)."

[242] *De Ver.* q. 1, a. 1. Aquinas generally speaks of truth in relation to the intellect (*intellectus*). However, he also speaks of it in relation to cognition (*cognitio*) (*Sent*. 1, d. 19, q. 5, a. 1, r. 1 and ad. 3) and to beings as cognitive (*cognoscitiva*) (*De Ver.* q. 21, a. 3, r. 1).

Whereas things 'are' for us in virtue of their unity, that things are, to some degree, true, is the reason they are *what* they are.[243] To the degree that something is true, it does not mislead us into thinking it is other than what it really is. What lacks truth, in contrast, to that extent deceives; it exists, but falsely, to some degree. It gives us the wrong impression. To the extent that something is true, it can be trusted to lead us to God. Thus, one may consider the truth of being as a gift from God, serving us like a signpost or a map directing us toward God, in the mind of whom all things are perfectly what they are.

God does not simply desire to be known (or, rather, regarded truly, which for human beings means by faith, since perfect knowledge of God is impossible, *a priori*). God desires (insofar as it makes sense to speak of God *desiring* at all) to be desired for the right reasons, which is to say *reflectively*, for reasons that reflect the truth of things. To the extent that one desires that which is, in truth, desirable, one accords with the transcendental good. As truth foregrounds the intelligibility of being, goodness foregrounds its attractiveness. All beings are created with a momentum in the direction of their perfection; as they are perfected, they are, to this extent, worthy of desire. If the truth of being is albedo, the goodness of being is akin to charge or spin.

The underlying epistemological conceit related to the cognition of transcendental truth and goodness is that the intellect and the will 'become one with' their objects of knowledge and intention, respectively. They form, however briefly, a unity. Thus, acts of cognition are acts of unification, and these acts have consequences for the actors—their minds change as they seek to understand the world, and so they may very well find themselves inclined to 'change their minds' about what really is true and good about it. The world looks different because they are, in fact, objectively different in virtue of their cognitive encounter with the world outside of themselves, and they now understand the world from a different point of view as a result of this transformation, however modest it may be. There is nothing automatic or easy about any of this. In fact, Emerson paints a picture in which these changes ordinarily result in the intellect and will standing opposed to one another in a sort of face-off.

> The intellectual and the active powers seem to succeed each other in man, and the exclusive activity of the one, generates the exclusive activity of the other.

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[243] ST I, q. 16, a. 3, ad. 1.

> There is something unfriendly in each to the other, but they are like the alternate periods of feeding and working in animals; each prepares and certainly will be followed by the other. Therefore does beauty, which, in relation to actions, as we have seen comes unsought, and comes because it is unsought, remain for the apprehension and pursuit of the intellect; and then again, in its turn, of the active power. Nothing divine dies. All good is eternally reproductive. The beauty of nature reforms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation[244]

Emerson describes an economy in which being cycles perpetually through its transcendental modes, sometimes more evident as truth, other times as goodness. In some moments, fleeting but profound, we experience their unity, and in such moments the beauty of creation is most perfectly on display: "Underneath the inharmonious and trivial particulars, is a musical perfection, the Ideal journeying always with us, the heaven without rent or seam."[245]

Earlier I referred to the *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos* of God's vocational appeal. We are now in a position to develop this idea with reference to the transcendentals. Consider *ethos* to correspond to the transcendental good; *logos* to transcendental truth and *pathos* to transcendental unity. Beauty, in turn, corresponds to harmony of the three transcendentals considered as a whole. When we discern and appreciate this harmony, we become ourselves integrated in a way we ordinarily are not—the cognitive, volitional and affective aspects of our personalities are perfectly ordered such that they *speak to us* in one commanding voice, pointing us toward one thing, the perfect being that is God.

The world taken up

One's vocation is, from an Emersonian point of view, a response to God's call to cultivate a sense of beauty, not only to appreciate beauty but to participate in creation by doing and creating beautiful things—in short, one is called to be beautiful in the way one lives one's life. This is what we might call the 'universal call to beauty,' the Emersonian analog to the 'universal call to holiness' of Vatican II. Through beauty, then, one is saved.[246]

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[244] *Nature*, 42.
[245] *Experience*, 238.
[246] "Beauty will save the world" — Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, Part 3, Chapter 5. Quoted by John Paul II in his "Letter to Artists" (1999): https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists.html and by Ratzinger in "The Feeling of Things, the Contemplation of Beauty" (2002): https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020824_ratzinger-cl-rimini_en.html (last accessed January 10, 2024).

Emerson's understanding of beauty as a harmony of the transcendentals allows human agency to enjoy a robust role in salvation, for unity can be perceived, truth discerned and goodness amplified to some degree through an act of will. In fact, Emerson can, at times, sound as though creation is almost entirely at one's disposal.

> Every rational creature has all nature for his dowry and estate. It is his, if he will. He may divest himself of it; he may creep into a corner, and abdicate his kingdom, as most men do, but he is entitled to the world by his constitution. In proportion to the energy of his thought and will, he **takes up the world** into himself.
>
> [W]hosoever has seen a person of powerful character and happy genius, will have remarked how easily he **took all things along with him**,— the persons, the opinions, and the day, and nature became ancillary to a man.[247]
>
> 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.[248]

It is crucial to remember, when reading passages like these, that Emerson is no utilitarian. That which is useful, is useful *for the sake of* our salvation, and what is useful for the sake of our salvation is hardly the same thing as that which we find pleasurable, as the allusion to Christ's passion surely serves to remind us. The 'ass' of nature might receive our dominion; yet, where it ultimately leads us is Golgotha. The kingdoms of nature are so many way stations *en route* to the Kingdom of God. We are not dealing with a 'will to power' here but rather something more like a will to submission.

To what, or whom, would Emerson have us submit? The examples Emerson uses to illustrate what such submission entails – the battlefield deaths of Leonidas at Thermopylae and Arnold von Winkelried at Sempach, the beheadings of Henry Vane (the Younger) on Tower Hill and William, Lord Russell in Lincoln's Inn Fields – are portraits of martyrdom, which is curious in at least two respects.[249] Firstly, we have seen that Emerson was at pains as a minister to

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[247] *Nature*, 42. Emphases mine.
[248] *Nature*, 41.
[249] Jacques-Louis David's *Leonidas at Thermopylae* (1814), an oil-on-canvas acquired by Louis XVIII in November 1819, may very well have been on display when Emerson visited the Louvre in June 1833. He also would have been familiar with the poems *Leonidas* by Richard Glover, *Arnold von Winkelried* by James Montgomery, and *Sonnet XVII. To Sir Henry Vane The Younger* by John Milton. William Russell was profiled in 1737 edition of *Foxe's Book of Martyrs.* Also in 1748, two plays were released characterizing Russell as a Protestant martyr, including *Lord*

distance himself from Eucharistic celebration; yet, he enthusiastically reintroduces blood, sacrifice and spectacle into his discussion of beauty in *Nature*. Secondly, the celebration of martyrdom is hardly what one would expect from an advocate of *individualism*. It is at least *prima facie* odd to consider self-sacrifice as somehow compatible with, if not constitutive of, self-reliance. Yet, this is precisely what Emerson seems to think. What is one to make of this?

That Emerson's heroes sacrifice themselves for the sake of freedom (as they see it—things will look different from the Persian, Austrian and Catholic perspectives, naturally) is not unimportant; but, it is more important to appreciate that those who 'take up the world' are *wounded* in some way. Treating beauty as power to 'wound' is a theme taken up by then Cardinal Ratzinger in his Message to the Communion and Liberation (CL) Meeting at Rimini (24-30) August 2002.

> The beautiful wounds, but this is exactly how it summons man to his final destiny. [It] has nothing to do with superficial aestheticism and irrationalism or with the flight from clarity and the importance of reason. The beautiful is knowledge certainly, but, in a superior form, since it arouses man to the real greatness of the truth. […] The encounter with the beautiful can become the wound of the arrow that strikes the heart and in this way opens our eyes, so that later, from this experience, we take the criteria for judgement and can correctly evaluate the arguments.[250]

Just as it is the beauty of Christ, specifically, by which Ratzinger ultimately would have us "struck and overcome," what Emerson is talking around, I think, is the ultimate 'taking up the world' by Jesus on the cross—the mystery of the Christ-event itself. Emerson would have us see beauty reflected especially in the *discretio*—fortitude or courage—so perfectly displayed by Jesus himself in his willingness to 'take up' the cross for the sake of the 'greater good,' in Christ's case nothing less than the salvation of humankind (more on this theme in a moment).

We see Emerson reflecting explicitly on the paradox of the crucifixion in his fifth sermon, first delivered on June 24, 1827.

Russell: A Tragedy by Reverend Thomas Stratford, in which Russell is explicitly compared to Leonidas. See Lois G. Schwoerer, "William, Lord Russell: The Making of a Martyr, 1683-1983," *Journal of British Studies* 24, no. 1 (Jan. 1985): 41-71.

[250] Ratzinger, "The Feeling of Things, the Contemplation of Beauty." Ratzinger credits the 14th century Byzantine theologian, Nicholas Cabasilas – his "The Life in Christ" especially – as anticipating this theme, as well as Plato in the *Phaedrus*.

> [A]s the mob moved toward Calvary there followed him a great company of people and women which bewailed and lamented him. The blessed martyr forgot the death he was to die, forgot the terrors of his ghastly cross in the impulse of his benevolence. He turned to them and said, Daughters of Jerusalem weep not for me but weep for yourselves and your children. His eye went forward to the future. He thought of the bitter retribution which this generation should reap when the armies of the Roman Empire should visit upon them their grievous transgression. He saw the havoc that war and famine and pestilence would bring to their doors, when, in their despair, heedless of the enemy without, they should rend each other in extreme rage; when blood should be poured as water in their street; and the foundations of the city should be turned up with the plough, when the mothers of Judaea, in the strong necessity of hunger, should forget the law of nature and slay for food the babe at the breast. These things his merciful spirit contemplated and he said, Weep not for me daughters of Jerusalem but weep for yourselves![251]

Foreseeing the disasters that would befall the People of Israel following an armed rebellion – a prophecy that ultimately came true with the destruction of the Second Temple during the first Jewish-Roman War (66-73), Jesus embraced his own crucifixion fully in the light of its ultimate good for others, which is at the same time a sense of compassion for the evils that he foresaw would be visited upon those in the near term who would not be diverted by his example from their present damnatory course.

Emerson, like Aquinas and Augustine before him, reminds us that it is not one's willingness to suffer injury, *per se*, that makes one courageous but rather the cause for which one is willing to suffer the injury.[252] The cause for which one might reasonably give one's life would have to appeal to a good that is even greater than the good that is one's life—and, in the Christian tradition, one's life, having been called into being by God, is of immense, if not immeasurable, value. Courage rests in one's willingness to be broken apart, so to speak, as a means to preserve a deeper, more essential unity than the unity of body and soul that is an individual human being. The broken man is paradoxically beautiful insofar as he reflects that 'higher' unity. As Pieper puts it:

> That man alone is brave who cannot be forced, through fear of transitory and lesser evils, to give up the greater and actual good, and thereby bring upon himself that which is ultimately and absolutely dreadful. This fear of the ultimately dreadful belongs, as the "reverse" of the love of God, to the

[251] CS 1:85 (Sermon 5).
[252] "Not the injury, but the cause makes martyrs." Augustine *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 34, 13.

> absolutely necessary foundations of fortitude (and of all virtue): "He who feareth the Lord will tremble at nothing" (Eccles. 34, 16).[253]

After the Christ-event, the cross no longer symbolizes punishment but salvation. Christians are no longer to fear it; rather, they are to fear not living up to it.

According to Aquinas, one is courageous who is fearless, but only in a special sense. In fact, only one who is *ultimately* fearful (of damnation, of being cut off from salvation, of losing one's soul) can be genuinely courageous. Relative to *that* fear, nothing else registers as truly frightening. Being freed from lesser fears, one is able to respond (freely, which is to say without the interference of disordered appetites) to God's graceful offer of salvation. This is why Aquinas, following the prophet Isaiah, calls the fear of God a "gift."[254]

When we contemplate creation in the light of this gift, the right sort of fears recede, and the presence of beauty is subsequently revealed where it might otherwise go unrecognized. This is to say that only in the absence of unreasonable fears (and all unreasonable passions and forms of self-interest) is aesthetic judgement possible.[255] By and large, Emerson follows the lead of Kant, for whom an aesthetic judgement involves the consideration of something entirely 'without interest' (*ohne Interesse*). The pleasure we derive from such consideration—delight, one of Emerson's favorite terms in *Nature*—is thus a disinterested pleasure (*Wohlgefallen*).[256] Disinterestedness is not the same thing as apathy or indifference. To be properly disinterested is actually in the 'interest of reason.' Such indifference is, in fact, what characterizes the point of view of a divine being. Being disinterested is, in a manner of speaking, to be *ultimately* interested—that is, to be interested exclusively in ultimate things, from the point of view of the ultimate end, known only in the mind of God. In assuming the role of 'judge,' I look at the world, in the act of judgement, as God might look at it. I become subject to my passions only such as God would have me register them. In a sense, I become 'other' to myself.

What we see in Emerson's discussion of beauty in *Nature* is the emergence of a distinction (implicit, for Emerson does not explicitly make such a distinction) between two

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[253] Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965 [1954]), 158.
[254] Isa. 11:3; Summa II-II q. 19, a. 9; cf. Sirach 25:16, "The fear of God is the beginning of love," cited by Aquinas ST II-II 19, a. 8, ad. 1 and a. 7, r. ad. 3.
[255] See ST I-II q. 94 a. 6. This is not to say that courage is a sufficient condition for the apprehension of beauty, only that it is a necessary one.
[256] The key passages in Kant are in the *Critique of Judgement*, Sections 41 and 42. See Jane Kneller, *Kant and the Power of Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 60-71.

senses of *ecstasy* (outside, *ek*, to be placed or caused to stand, *histanai*). In the one sense, the sense associated with the 'transparent eyeball, there is a delightful (as opposed to terrifying) dissolution of one's sense of self (Although, to be fair, there is something, if not terrifying, then at least weird about a transparent eyeball…). Emerson does indeed speak, and quite gushingly so, of this kind of ecstasy, although he is far too 'uptight' to make this his dominant emphasis (the way an Emersonian like, say, Whitman does); however, it is ecstasy in another sense that is more in line with the sensibility of Emerson himself. This second sense of ecstasy follows the lead of Jennifer Herdt, who herself claims to be following Aquinas, in emphasizing the ecstatic character of love.[257] While Aquinas affirms that all love (*amor*) involves being 'placed out of oneself' in some way, he draws a distinction between being ecstatic in a restricted and unrestricted sense. It is the former, restricted sense of love that Thomas thinks characterizes concupiscent love; the latter typifies friendship love.

In the following chapter (Emerson's Ecclesiology), I will suggest that, for Emerson, the community of lovers in this special, unrestricted sense is the ideal Church. Such a Church would be, in a sense, a (perfect) society of friends (a conclusion perhaps that should not be surprising given the influence of George Fox on Emerson), although, as we will soon discover, an Emersonian Church of men to come would have to be less a 'society' of friends than an embodiment of a 'culture' of friendship. Such a culture turns out to be a culture of *vocation*.

[257] See Jennifer A. Herdt, *Assuming Responsibility: Ecstatic Eudaimonism and the Call to Live Well* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

Chapter Five: Emerson's Ecclesiology

Introduction

In Emerson's sacramental imagination, elements of Christian Platonism, in both Kantian and Romantic inflections, are layered upon a hidden Thomistic base in such a way that we find ourselves in a world in which Spirit is ubiquitous. Moreover, our cognitive capacities are such that moral insights—nothing less than revelations of a sort—are available to the ordinary person, albeit through extraordinary effort.

> [E]very natural process is but a version of a moral sentence. The moral law lies at the centre of nature and radiates to the circumference. It is the pith and marrow of every substance, every relation, and every process. All things with which we deal, preach to us.[258]

In a world so enchanted, soteriological resources are so available and robust that it is tempting to think that one might be capable of saving oneself, so to speak, without any need for the intervention or counsel of others, much less a Church with its hierarchy, magisterium and rituals. Such is a temptation, indeed, to which Emerson would seem *prima facie* to succumb:

> We get our faith from others. That is the great evil of all religious history. Men allow the Church to regulate their faith. A church again asks of an eminent individual what it shall determine. Calvin thinks for thousands; and Wesley for thousands. And that office, of thinking, of believing, which cannot be done for another is done in appearance, & the worst consequences follow. Every falsehood which one of these leaders received is then transmitted from church to church for ages. If each soul had been instructed that its first duty as a moral being was to reflect, to go alone before God with its prayer & its obedience, no errors would have been transmitted with authority.[259]

Thus, even while speaking from the pulpit, Emerson was skeptical of the role of media and mediators in the transmission of the faith. It is an aversion that hardly had diminished in intensity by the time he delivered his *Divinity School Address* (1838):

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[258] *Nature*, 51-2.
[259] CS 3:99 (Sermon 106).

> All men go in flocks to this saint or that poet, avoiding the God who seeth in secret. They cannot see in secret; they love to be blind in public. They think society wiser than their soul, and know not that one soul, and their soul, is wiser than the whole world.[…] [E]ach would be an easy secondary to some Christian scheme, or sectarian connexion, or some eminent man. Once leave your own knowledge of God, your own sentiment, and take secondary knowledge, as St. Paul's, or George Fox's, or Swedenborg's, and you get wide from God with every year this secondary form lasts, and if, as now, for centuries,—the chasm yawns to that breadth, that men can scarcely be convinced there is in them anything divine. Let me admonish you, first of all, to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those most sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil. Friends enough you shall find who will hold up to your emulation Wesleys and Oberlins, Saints and Prophets. Thank God for these good men, but say, 'I also am a man.'[260]

From a Catholic perspective, such a position as Emerson's would seem to fail to take sufficiently into account that salvation is an irreducibly communal endeavor.

That it takes a collective effort—an *ecclesia*—to get at the mystery of salvation is hardly a uniquely Catholic proposition. For Christians generally, the route to salvation runs, one way or another, through something like 'the Church.'

> Faith, in fact, needs a setting in which it can be witnessed to and communicated, a means which is suitable and proportionate to what is communicated. For transmitting a purely doctrinal content, an idea might suffice, or perhaps a book, or the repetition of a spoken message. But what is communicated in the Church, what is handed down in her living Tradition, is the new light born of an encounter with the true God, a light which touches us at the core of our being and engages our minds, wills and emotions, opening us to relationships lived in communion.[261]

For Catholics the Church is indispensable, "the sign of salvation on earth."[262] In fact, the Church is no ordinary sign; it is a sacrament, nothing less than "a sacrament for the salvation of the world."[263] Thus, in addition to being the setting in which one receives *the* sacraments, the Church itself just *is* a sacrament of sorts, something one performs and receives, in gratitude, for the gift of faith. In other words, being in community with one another as Church somehow facilitates our sense of being in communion with God. That we might be as gifts to one another is itself a great gift—perhaps *the* great gift besides the Christ-event itself—at the heart of Christian salvation.

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[260] *Divinity School Address*, 122-3. "Seeth in secret" alludes to Matt. 6:4 and 6:18.
[261] Francis. *Lumen Fidei*, 40.
[262] GS 43.
[263] Synod of Bishops 1985: II. D. 1. See also GS 45.

The documents of the Second Vatican Council present the Church as the "People of God," the result of God's ongoing work of gathering people together that began with the call of Abraham, whose descendants constituted the chosen People of Israel.

> As God did not create man for life in isolation, but for the formation of social unity, so also "it has pleased God to make men holy and save them not merely as individuals, without bond or link between them, but by making them into a single people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness." So from the beginning of salvation history He has chosen men not just as individuals but as members of a certain community. Revealing His mind to them, God called these chosen ones "His people" (Ex. 3:7-12), and even made a covenant with them on Sinai.[264]

While it was among the People of Israel that God became incarnate as Jesus, the scope of the salvation offered by and through Jesus extended beyond the historical boundaries of that nation up to that point. Since St. Paul the *ecclesia* is self-consciously trans-national – "if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:29) – and tends to be broadly inclusive, the contemporary Catholic Church going so far as to count among its ranks "all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way."[265]

So inclusive and broad is this conception of Church that it prompts the question: What exactly is *not* Church? Traditionally, the 'something' that begins where the Church ends is referred to as 'the world' or 'the present age' (*mundum*, *saeculum*). Also among the Greek words rendered as 'world' in the New Testament is *oikoumene*, the root of the English term 'ecumenical.' The *oikoumene* originally extended to the boundaries of the Roman empire. Although relations between the early Church and Greco-Roman culture were anything but straightforward and remain to this day hardly settled matters, the Church early on assumed an ecumenical posture, seeking to harmonize elements of the *oikoumene* with its own native beliefs when possible. This is one sense in which the early Church understood itself as *catholic*.

While acknowledging that the Kingdom of God toward which the Christian is ultimately oriented is, in some sense, "not of this world," the Catholic Church has consistently resisted the suggestion that it ought to stand permanently or utterly in opposition to something called 'the

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[264] GS 32. The quoted section beginning "it has pleased…" is from LG Chapter II, 9

[265] GS 22; cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1016, 1021-1024 (Book 4, Chapter 1) who speaks of the (visible) church as "the whole multitude of men spread over the earth who profess to worship one God and Christ."

world.'[266] Emerson is similarly resistant, basically in alignment with the documents of Vatican II which reiterate that the Church is always in the world, and the world in the Church, and that this is nothing necessarily to regret. The world is rich in soteriological potential, just as rich as the Church is in its potential for sin. Each church is potentially a 'check' on each other, so long as ecumenism is the law of the land.

In his Roman epiphany, Emerson recognized the ecumenical instinct as the genius of the Catholic Church, albeit one that, like his America, is perhaps "more splendid in its promise and more slight in its performance."[267] His overriding sense is that actually existing Catholicism does not do justice to the catholicity it claims to embody. This is not exclusively a fault of the Roman Church. Emerson's intuition is that no form of what he will come to call, in his *Divinity School Address*, 'historical Christianity' is going to be catholic enough for his liking. Indeed, it would be challenging for any organized Christianity to satisfy Emerson's criteria for catholicity, so radical is his ecumenism in its mature form: "Let us not have the prayers of one sect, nor of the Christian Church, but of men in all ages and religions who have prayed well."[268]

Who and what exactly belongs in Church, how it ought to be organized, and what should and should not go on inside it, are topics upon which Emersonians and Catholics likely will have difficulty seeing perfectly eye to eye. Among other things, the Emersonians do not and perhaps ultimately cannot countenance the Catholic ecclesial web, which involves the acknowledgment of the Bishop of Rome as the structural and sacramental focus of Catholic communion.[269] Emerson himself is too steeped in the 'Congregational Way' to believe that Jesus instituted a particular hierarchy to transmit and defend the deposit of the faith until the end of the world. Moreover, the *laissez faire* attitude with which the Emersonians tend to treat matters of form in language and ritual, to say nothing of their penchant for novelty, is likely to rub Catholic sensibilities the wrong way.

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[266] See Jn 17:14-16; 18:36. SM 1:346-56. William T. Cavanaugh, "Westphalia and Back: Complexifying the Church-World Duality in Catholic Thought." *Journal of Moral Theology* 2, no. 2 (2013), 1–20.
[267] *Nominalist & Realist*, 252.
[268] *Prayers* (Dial, July 1842). CW 10:169.
[269] Paul Murray notes that this is a point of Catholic distinctiveness recognized by the first Agreed Statement to emerge from the third phase of work of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, see ARCIC III, *Walking Together on the Way: Learning to Be the Church – Local, Regional, and Universal* (London: SPCK, 2018), 30-31.

Nevertheless, given the hidden and deep affinities we have discovered between the Emersonian and Catholic imaginations, it should not by this point entirely surprise us were we to find that there is an ecclesiology implicit in Emerson, and that it is more amenable to Catholic appropriation than might be apparent at first glance. One might think that if, for Emerson, 'historical' Christianity is a problem, then an ahistorical or 'transcendental' Christianity is perhaps his recommended solution. I confess that it is not impossible—it is, in fact, perfectly plausible—to read Emerson this way; however, it is not the *only* way to read him.[270] Such an interpretation, I think, fails to appreciate the extent to which salvation history remains the backdrop against which Emerson makes ultimate sense of the world and one's place within it; but, it is salvation history viewed primarily from the 'subject side' of things, what I have earlier labeled 'vocation history.' What opposes 'historical' Christianity is not ahistorical but rather vocational (vocation-historical) Christianity. Whereas the Catholic will be inclined to think of vocation history in terms of 'Tradition,' the Emersonian will invite us to consider it as embedded in a 'culture;' but, the difference here is less important than the similarity. My suggestion in this chapter is that, when thinking about what a culture of vocation within the Church might look like, the Emersonian and the contemporary Catholic have much to offer one another.

This chapter establishes the plausibility of three claims: 1) Emerson's understanding of Church, once filtered of his own cultural prejudices, is not necessarily opposed to the idea of an authoritative Tradition or an ecclesial hierarchy *per se*; 2) 'Tradition' in the Catholic sense and 'culture' in Emerson's sense are synonymous. They at least function similarly insofar as they supply the vocation histories that serve as the interpretive frameworks through which not only Scripture but all of creation might be understood as meaningful, insofar as they can be understood at all by created beings; 3) A culture befitting of the Church would be, for Emerson, vocational in a way that is not out of step with important themes in contemporary Catholic theology.

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[270] Those emphasizing Emerson's ahistoricism include F. O. Matthiesen, Charles Feidelson, R. W. B. Lewis and Harold Bloom. My own reading of Emerson's relationship to his times and to history in general tends to favor the more revisionary path traversed by the likes of Len Gougeon, Scavan Bercovitch, Michael Lopez, Carolyn Porter, Lawrence Buell, Barbara Packer and David Robinson.

Brief historical excursus

Emerson's attitude toward 'Church' was colored especially by his understanding of one particular Church: the Church of England. The New England of his forefathers was a haven for English Calvinists frustrated in their efforts to rid that Church of the last vestiges of its Roman Catholic predecessor. Calvinists initially welcomed the ascension in 1603 of James I whom they assumed, born a Scot and raised Presbyterian, would be sympathetic to their reforming agenda; however, it swiftly became clear at the Hampton Court Conference (1604) that James was not the reformer for whom many Calvinists had been hoping. Although he conceded to minor revisions of the Book of Common Prayer and the law of excommunication, James flatly rejected more substantial complaints against the discipline and ceremonies of the Church. He made it clear that conformity would be the watchword of his administration. He demanded that all clergy acknowledge his supremacy in temporal and spiritual matters and that they formally subscribe to Archbishop Whitgift's Three Articles of 1583, shortly afterwards enshrined as Anglican Canon 36.[271]

Whereas before him Elizabeth I had acted with little regard for the prestige and economic standing of her clergy, James prized them. "No bishop, no king" he went so far as to proclaim at Hampton Court.[272] Under James, the affairs of 'Church' unapologetically conspired with those of 'State.' Clergy were appointed to parliament. Bishops served as chancellors of Oxford. James kept bishops such as Lancelot Andrewes, James Montague, and Richard Neile at court for company and counsel. Neile actually sat on the standing committee for defense in the House of Lords in the 1620s and effectively controlled the local militia when he served as Lord Lieutenant of the County Palatine of Durham. "In James," sums up Andrew Foster, "the clergy found a man who valued them enough to make them councilors, a patron who restored to them some degree of financial independence, and a king who spoke openly of their rights and place in society. This commanded support akin to adulation in return."[273]

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[271] *The Anglican Canons, 1529-1947*, ed. Gerald Bray (Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 1998), 216-231.
[272] Kenneth Fincham and Peter Lake, "The Ecclesiastical Policies of James I and Charles I," *The Early Stuart Church, 1603–1642*, ed. Kenneth Fincham (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 26.
[273] Andrew Foster, "The Clerical Estate Revitalized," in *The Early Stuart Church, 1603–1642*, 141-143. See also Andrew Foster. *The Church of England*, 1570–1640 (New York: Longman, 1994).

The Church of England thus remained an *episcopal* church, governed by bishops appointed by kings. Almost immediately following Hampton Court, the religious landscape was split between those who subscribed to Canon 36 – anti-Calvinists, conforming Calvinists and 'moderate' Puritans – and those 'radical,' nonconforming Puritans who did not. From the point of view of the radical Puritans, the episcopacy tended to frustrate rather than further the workings of God and His Providence. It tended toward corruption, tied inextricably as it was to the political order, and so stood perpetually in need of reform when it was not judged utterly irredeemable (a judgement that, after the Restoration, became increasingly common among radical Puritans). Emerson's ancestors, some of the first to voyage across the Atlantic to establish the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay colonies, saw it as their duty to put forward an alternative vision of Church. Their solution – the "Congregational Way" – was to consider the true church rather as something that emerged from the 'bottom up' than the 'top down.'

In a loose sense, a congregational Church just was its parish, consisting of a community of the baptized from whom financial support and attendance at worship was expected; however, strictly speaking, the congregational Church included only those parishioners who had offered evidence of their conversion—"a personall & publick confession, & declaring of Gods manner of working upon the soul."[274] These were the Calvinist *elect*, and they were the ones invited to participate in the Lord's Supper and whose children were eligible for baptism. Congregational ministers stood out as the elect among the elect, so to speak, gatekeepers holding the keys to full membership in the Church. While they were formally barred from holding political office, ministers nevertheless wielded considerable political authority. Magistrates tended not to act without first consulting them, and ministers in turn often served as the mouthpieces of the magistrates, disseminating information from the General Court to their parishioners. In Emerson's Massachusetts, in the words of Henry Adams, "society was organized on a system – a clergy in alliance with a magistracy; a university supporting each, and supported in turn – a social hierarchy in which respectability, education, property and religion united to defeat the

[274] Nathanael Emmons, *The Cambridge Platform of Church Discipline; Adopted in 1648. And, the Confession of Faith: Adopted in 1680. to Which Is Prefixed, a Platform of Ecclesial Government* (Boston: Congregational Board of Publication, 1855), Chapter 12: https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044023317159&view=1up&seq=42 (last accessed May 25, 2023). See also David D. Hall, "New England (1660-1730)," in *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, ed. John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 145.

unwise and vicious." Little wonder that Congregational ministers in Massachusetts simply referred to themselves as the Standing Order.[275]

The Standing Order thus functioned as a virtual episcopacy. That Emerson did not express any special distain for this arrangement is, I think, noteworthy. Emerson's criticism of the congregational ministry focused on the quality of its preaching and the character of its preachers, not on congregational*ism* as such, not on its political entanglements or even its elitist tendencies. This is to say that it is not quite correct to think of Emerson as anti-clerical or even as classically liberal in his attitude toward Church and State. As we saw in the previous chapter, Emerson is perfectly comfortable with the assumption of a submissive posture before authority so long as what is being authorized accords with the moral law. Emerson's issue with church leaders is that they tend not to be demanding enough in their interpretations of what the moral law entails in particular cases; or, rather, that they mistake moral conformity, a sort of moral minimum, with genuine vocational discernment, the on-ramp to moral perfection. It is a lazy or mindless conformity to which Emerson objects, not conformity *per se*.

In short, congregationalism was a 'good enough' ecclesial arrangement for Emerson; but this is no reason to believe that it should be the final word. It is telling, I think, that Emerson never saw fit to align himself with another Christian denomination upon leaving the ministry, even as the options available to him were plentiful in the wake of the "Second Great Awakening." The 1830s was a golden age of American Calvinism, to say nothing of the missionary successes of the Methodists and Baptists. Emerson also witnessed the emergence of new distinctively American religious movements such as Mormonism and what would become Christian Science. Even Catholicism, through Orestes Brownson, was available to him. Despite his admiration of Swedenborg, Emerson never seriously considered joining the New Church. Toward matters of church membership and polity, Emerson's basic orientation is one of indifference. His energy is focused elsewhere.

My only point here is to suggest that the episcopal structure of the Catholic Church need not be a porcupine for the Emersonian. Emerson would have us focus on the culture of the contemporary Church, not its structure, and it is my contention that core elements of this culture are fundamentally hospitable to Emersonian individualism.

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[275] Peter S. Field, *The Crisis of the Standing Order: Clerical Intellectuals and Cultural Authority in Massachusetts, 1780-1833* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 14.

Revelation, Tradition and the Church

The contemporary Church is especially clear that, while the words of Revelation – especially those recorded in Scripture – are of principal importance, the Revelation is ultimately 'more than words.' What is 'more than words' in Revelation is revealed through Tradition. Viewed diachronically, Tradition just is the Church extended in time; however, viewed synchronically, the Church stands apart from Tradition as the interpretive framework through which the Tradition (including its own history of reception) is received. The Church as an institution *presents* (literally makes present) the Tradition at a given moment in time for the formation and general edification of the Christian faithful.

A key post-Conciliar point of emphasis, embedded in the Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation (*Dei verbum*), is that what is handed down as Tradition must be understood as going beyond the explicit preaching of Jesus and his apostles to include the messages implicit in their behavior as well as the experiences of the Christian faithful since the Christ-event. Ratzinger sums it up this way:

> [T]he guidance of the Paraclete promised to the disciples is not a '*dictatio'* [dictation] but '*suggestio'* [suggestion], the remembering and understanding of the unspoken in what was once spoken, which reaches down to the depth of a process that cannot be measured by the terms '*praedicatio oralis'*, and the transmission of which cannot therefore be merely a process of the handing down of words.[276]

Ratzinger's *suggestio* recalls the distinctive quality of the vocational call (not exactly a command, not exactly a polite request). Moreover, the Documents of Vatican II stress the *comprehensive* nature of Revelation, meaning that, among other things, it is to be understood as having an appeal that is beyond *logos*, that is personal in that *ethos* and *pathos* also are allowed to be meaningful, to compel.

> A comprehensive view of Revelation, precisely because it is concerned with the whole man, is founded not only in the word that Christ preached, but in the whole of the living experience of his person, thus embracing what is said and what is unsaid, what the Apostles in their turn are not able to express fully in

[276] Ratzinger, "The Transmission of Divine Revelation," in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. 3, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 182.

> words, but which is found in the whole reality of the Christian existence of which they speak, far transcending the framework of what has been explicitly formulated in words.[277]

Ratzinger contrasts the approach of Vatican I, in which one appeals to 'supernatural' Revelation only after appeals to the natural knowledge of God have been exhausted, with the approach of Vatican II, in which the question of the natural knowledge of God is itself postponed until it is framed by a comprehensive survey of salvation history. The starting point is now the experience of divine encounter—on the personal relationship with God which has, as all relationships do, a history.[278]

The issues facing the post-Conciliar Church with respect to the relationship between Revelation and Tradition are not dissimilar to those addressed by the Emersonians *vis-à-vis* the 'revelations' of the Higher Criticism. While the Emersonians were disinclined to avail themselves of something like an authoritative Tradition as they set out to discover new "regress stopping items" upon which the meaning of a sacred vocabulary might be grounded (see Chapter Three), they did not abandon their sense of time and time past. The 'Reason' with which they tended to buttress their claims was historically informed. While some chose a more Kantian inflection of Reason, others, like Emerson himself, opted to engage the more Romantic, Coleridgian one, which allows for traditional concerns (to say nothing of a concern for tradition itself) to be sneaked in through the back door, so to speak. In this way, I think, Aquinas was able to find his way, unbeknownst, into Emerson's imagination.

Insofar as one thinks of Emerson as seeking to supplement Tradition as it has been received (more or less passively and uncritically) with the insights gleaned from active reflection upon one's own vocation history – that is, by way of Reason as one actively interrogates the received Tradition in light of one's experience of the created world as one finds it now — one might think of Emerson as working in a space cleared by Rahner:

> [T]here is a true individual ethics; this means that the adequate and total call the individual receives from God does not only consist in the sum of the general Christian moral and spiritual norms. We may even say that spirituality begins only when all this has been fulfilled. … [B]y fulfilling the precepts of the catechism and the commandments of the Church and being in this sense a good

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[277] Ratzinger, "The Transmission of Divine Revelation," 182.
[278] Tracey Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 49-53.

> Christian, we have not yet adequately responded to God's call in our concrete and unique person.[279]

These "individual ethics" and their attendant "spirituality" are what one works out in and through vocational moments – revelatory episodes of a certain stripe – as one journeys along the road to salvation. Vocational spaces are way stations along this road. In them, we find ourselves more receptive and inclined to discern God's self-communication as it is addressed to us, personally, in a way that is at least like being spoken to by another human being. The fundamental vocational space is, or at least ought to be, the Church. Within its universe, vocational states of life, sometimes nested within one another (as, for instance, in the case of a religious priest or a married deacon) are rendered ultimately meaningful, as the universal call to holiness is given a particular form and expression.

A space is 'vocational' insofar as it is curved such that one might be captured within God's orbit, becoming a satellite ultimately falling toward God, not sin, but all the while retaining one's own distinctive identity and sense of agency. What I have previously called 'vocational appeal' is precisely this peculiar gravitational 'pull.' A proximate cause of this divine gravity is beauty considered as a harmony of the transcendentals. As we established previously (Chapter 4), this is a proposition on which Emerson and the Catholic Church can basically agree.

While Catholic thought is hardly allergic to the notion of timeless truths, it has consistently stressed that the intelligibility of such truths rest upon a bedrock of Tradition. Tradition is the condition of the possibility of meaningful Revelation. The past is constitutive of the present. This is as true for Rahner as Ratzinger, both of whom, one will recall, participated in the redrafting of *Dei verbum* and subsequently co-published the booklet *Revelation and Tradition* (1965). There is nothing in what follows from Rahner with which the future Benedict XVI would, I think, take issue:

> [T]he word is more than a mere externalization in sound, a signaling of a thought which could equally well exist without the accompaniment of this animal noise. As if the thought were a mere conventional signal in the brute spiritlessness of the animal and material world which we – spirits – are constrained to frequent! No, the word is rather the corporeal state in which what we now experience and think first begins to exist by fashioning itself into this its word-body. To be more precise: the word is the embodied thought, not the embodiment of the thought. It is more than the thought and more original than

[279] Rahner, *Grace in Freedom*, 133.

> the thought, just as the entire man is more than, and more original than, his body and his soul considered separately. For this reason no language can substitute for another. […] Men speaking different languages can understand one another and one language can be translated into another, just as the most diverse men can live together and even be born from one another. But this does not make languages into a row of external façades, behind all of which dwells simply one and the same thought. The *noche* of a John of the Cross and the *Nacht* of a Novalis or a Nietzsche are not the same; the *agape* of the hymn in the thirteenth chapter of the First Letter to the Corinthians and the 'love' of European peoples differ not merely in their 'application' […].[280]

The contemporary Church thus teaches that apart from the languages and cultural forms in which they are expressed, the transcendentals are practically meaningless.

Culture, *communio* and the People of God

On the one hand, Emerson is in accord with the teaching of the post-Conciliar Church that the inculturation of Christian revelation is, to some degree, inevitable. We comprehend the *logos* of the divine call from inside a language which is itself bound to a culture that cannot fully be dismissed without incurring some loss of meaning.

> [T]he whole state of man is a state of culture; and its flowering and completion may be described as Religion, or Worship. There is always some religion, some hope and fear extended into the invisible,—from the blind boding which nails a horseshoe to the mast or the threshold, up to the song of the Elders in the Apocalypse. But the religion cannot rise above the state of the votary. Heaven always bears some proportion to earth. The god of the cannibals will be a cannibal, of the crusaders a crusader, and of the merchants a merchant. In all ages, souls out of time, extraordinary, prophetic, are born, who are rather related to the system of the world, than to their particular age and locality. These announce absolute truths, which, with whatever reverence received, are speedily dragged down into a savage interpretation.[281]

Thus, even as Emerson allows for the possibility of apprehending absolute truths that elude the savageries of interpretation, he admits that such glimpses are uncommon, reserved for "souls out of time" or, as Emerson puts it elsewhere, "fine" and "inviolate" souls.

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[280] Karl Rahner, "'Priest and Poet', foreword to *La hora sin tiempo* (poems by Jorge Blajot S. J.)," *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 3, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1967), 295.
[281] *Worship*, E 1057.

> The inviolate soul is in perpetual telegraphic communication with the source of events. He has earlier information, a private dispatch which relieves him of the terror which presses on the rest of the community. He is a learner of the laws of nature and the experiences of history; an ear to hear; an organ to receive and impart; a prophet surrendered with self-abandoning sincerity to the Heaven which pours through him its will to mankind.[282]

The communion of such prophetic and courageous souls would not, according to Emerson, form a *society*. Society is always pitted against individual excellence, and fine souls necessarily dwell at some distance from it.

> Tis the fine souls who serve us, and not what is called fine society. Fine society is only a self-protection against the vulgarities of the street and the tavern. Fine society, in the common acceptation, has neither ideas nor aims. It renders the service of a perfumery, or a laundry, not of a farm or factory.[283]

Culture, in contrast to 'society' with its "custom and gross sense," trivialities, and distractions, is what properly nourishes the imagination and encourages one to assume the position of a soul out of time. Such souls can be identified, Emerson thinks, insofar as they are inspired to create works which might help others 'bridge the gap' between the created and uncreated worlds.[284]

> To create,—to create,—is the proof of a divine presence. Whatever talents may be, if the man create not, the pure efflux of the Deity is not his;—cinders and smoke there may be, but not yet flame. There are creative manners, there are creative actions, and creative words; manners, actions, words, that is, indicative of no custom or authority, but springing spontaneous from the mind's own sense of good and fair.[285]

The creativity of culture thus stands in contrast to the stultifying and insular tendencies of society. Through art and culture human beings effectively participate in the divine act of creation itself. Their creativity is analogous, in some small yet important way, to the activity of the Creator, and so might yield insight into the divine mind.

From a Catholic point of view, the place of culture in Emerson's thought might be heard as an anticipation of Vatican II's reconsideration of the Church as a model of the perfect society (*societas perfecta*). This ecclesiological work began during Emerson's lifetime, through the work of Johan Adam Möhler (1796-1838), who was, in turn, influenced by Schleiermacher, no small

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[282] *The Scholar*, 481.
[283] *Considerations by the Way*, 1080.
[284] *Experience*, 227.
[285] *The American Scholar,* 96.

influence on Emerson himself. Schleiermacher understood the Holy Spirit as "the uniting of the divine being with human nature in the form of the common spirit (*Gemeingeist*) that animates the collective life of faithful persons."[286] For those following the lead of Schleiermacher, the *Gemeingeist* of the Church shifts front and center while "the personality of Christ" fades somewhat into the background as the locus of divine encounter. Pneumatology is associated directly with ecclesiology, leading some, like Karl Barth, eventually to complain that those who followed too closely in Schleiermacher's footsteps ended up *reducing* pneumatology to ecclesiology.[287] Charles Journet (1891-1975) developed ideas along these lines using language he felt more accurately reflected the real Aquinas than the Aquinas of the scholastic manuals. In *The Theology of the Church* (1957), it is not "the hierarchical powers of order and jurisdiction" but rather the Holy Spirit, as an aspect of the Trinity, that is the first efficient cause and uncreated, invisible soul of the Church; and, the Christian faithful (of all ranks, not only the laity) are taken to be the material cause or visible body of the Church.[288] Emerson, very much an heir to Unitarian ways of thinking about God and Church, does not mesh neatly with the Trinitarian thought of the Catholic tradition; nevertheless, insofar as rapprochement is possible, the most promising avenue would seem to me to run in the manner of Journet through the Third Person of the Trinity.

The Holy Spirit features prominently in post-Conciliar Catholic ecclesiology, even though the precise way in which one should imagine the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Church remains contentious. A fault line separates two camps: adherents to the ecclesiology of the People of God and those committed to the ecclesiology of communion (*communio*).[289] The People of God feature in Chapter Two of *Lumen Gentium*, introduced tellingly prior to Chapter Three "On the Hierarchical Constitution of the Church and in Particular on the Episcopacy." It

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[286] Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *Christian Faith* (Two-Volume Set). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. §123, 1260. See also Randy L. Maddox, "Schleiermacher on the Holy Spirit," *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 12 (1982): 93-106.
[287] Barth, Karl. *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959) 66.
[288] Journet, Charles Cardinal. *The Theology of the Church*. (1987 [1957]) Ignatius Press. Kindle Edition. This work is an abridgement of the two volume *The Church of the Incarnate Word* (1941, 1951). See also "L'Église a ravi son cœur: Charles Journet and the Theologians of Ressourcement on the Personality of the Church." *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology*. Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). 125-137.
[289] For a good high-level summary of the schools of thought on the topic of the post-Vatican II Church, see Joseph A. Komonchak, "Ecclesiology of Vatican II," *Origins* 28 (Apr. 22, 1999): 763-68 as well as Paul McPartland's entry on "Church" in *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology*, ed. Lewis Ayres, et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). For a magisterial survey, see Walter Kasper, *Catholic Church: Nature, Reality and Mission*, trans. Thomas Hoebel, ed. R. David Nelson (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).

names an orientation toward the Church that is historically conscious, somewhat averse to hierarchy and generally leveling, an orientation that we might label 'horizontal' insofar as it seeks to bring to the fore the *humanity* of the Church. In addition to emphasizing the continuity of the Church with Israel and its covenant relationship with God, the People of God is an image of a pilgrim people in the midst of a journey and not yet beyond the effects of sin. This horizontal orientation of the People of God ecclesiology contrasts with the more vertical orientation of *communio* ecclesiology. The image of the Church in *communio* ecclesiology reflects the relationships that exist first among the Persons of the Trinity, and then are subsequently reflected in the Incarnation, before they are manifested in ordinary human relationships. Participation in the life of the Church is fundamentally the pursuit of mystical union between God (as Trinity) and humanity.[290] The danger of a horizontal approach to ecclesiology is an excessive worldliness—that our attention might be inclined to stop at the *horizon* of human affairs, unduly (according to adherents of communion ecclesiology) attending to political, social and economic concerns rather that more directly to the sacramental presence of God, and so we incline toward Pelagianism. The corresponding danger of a more vertical orientation is that the fullness of humanity is eclipsed by excessive inwardness and disengagement from the world, thus inclining us toward gnosticism.

Even since it was recognized at the 1985 Second Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops as "the central idea and fundamental idea in the documents of the Council," *communio* ecclesiology has become ascendant in Catholic theology, serving as the preferred ecclesial image of both John Paul II and Benedict XVI.[291] Pope Francis, however, rarely employs the vocabulary of *communio*, preferring the image of the People of God, and so the tension continues to be felt acutely. What Francis seems to appreciate about the image of the People of God is its inclusivity and capacity to accommodate a diversity of opinions and attitudes. The risk of disunity is, for Francis, one worth taking. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis,

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[290] Jospeh Ratzinger, "The Ecclesiology of the Constitution Lumen Gentium," in *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 123–152.

[291] Second Extraordinary General Assembly-The Twentieth Anniversary of the Conclusion of the Second Vatican Council (24 November-8 December 1985). Final Report "The Church, In The Word Of God, Celebrates The Mysteries Of Christ For The Salvation Of The World*"* (II, C). https://www.nytimes.com/1985/12/08/world/text-of-final-report-adopted-by-synod-of-bishops-in-rome.html (last accessed June 1, 2023).

perhaps with the more zealous adherents of *communio* ecclesiology in mind, is critical of efforts within the Church to impose "monolithic uniformity."

> Within the Church countless issues are being studied and reflected upon with great freedom. Differing currents of thought in philosophy, theology and pastoral practice, if open to being reconciled by the Spirit in respect and love, can enable the Church to grow, since all of them help to express more clearly the immense riches of God's word. For those who long for a monolithic body of doctrine guarded by all and leaving no room for nuance, this might appear as undesirable and leading to confusion. But in fact such variety serves to bring out and develop different facets of the inexhaustible riches of the Gospel.[292]

Francis insists that the Holy Spirit "enriches the Church with different charisms."[293] These differences are not simply overcome, nor does Francis think that they necessarily should be. They certainly should not, he thinks, be ignored, and so Francis stresses the importance of developing a "kerygmatic and mystagogical catechesis" as opposed to a dogmatic approach to imparting the faith of the Church, the importance of "ongoing formation and maturation" and the need to develop an "art of accompaniment" that will engage Christians in these processes.[294] For Francis, then, *communio* ecclesiology does not have a monopoly on the mystical dimension of faith—the People of God is a plenty mysterious notion, the interpersonal unity we forge among human beings in their wild diversity being at least as compelling as the more cosmic unity that one might encounter in the contemplation of the communion of the divine Persons of the Trinity.

Idealism and individualism

I think 'the People of God' is one of four 'big ideas'—the others being sacrament, *communio* and vocation – that might serve well as centerpieces of a systematic theology fit for the post-Vatican II Church. Obviously, I am inclined to cast my lot with vocation, primarily due to my assessment of its *ecumenical* potential; but, for those less enthusiastic about the ecumenical project generally, the others certainly have their merits.[295] My contention is that an

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[292] *Evangelii Gaudium* 40, 131.
[293] Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 130.
[294] Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 163, 160, 169.
[295] Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (Mission: Sheed and Ward, 1963) is an example of how much might be done pressing on the concept of sacrament for systematic leverage.

Emersonian theology of vocation might serve to suture these competing visions of the Church and thereby allow *communio* to fulfill its promise as a "central and fundamental idea" that serves to unite more than it divides the members of the Church. It would help us to mediate the tension between the horizontal and vertical in post-Conciliar ecclesiology if we were to understand it as somehow *vocational* in the same way that Emerson understands as vocational the tension between what he calls 'idealism' and 'individualism' that is constitutive of his very idea of culture. This tension is one that Emerson, I think, manages expertly as he works out the implications of his affirmation of two apparently incompatible claims: "the basis of Culture is that part of human nature which in philosophy is called the ideal" and "[…] individuality is not only not inconsistent with culture, but is the basis of it."[296]

For the Emersonian, idealism is associated with what we have been calling the Platonic imagination. It contrasts with sensualism, materialism and empiricism—all of which are associated with what we have been calling the Epicurean imagination. In terms of the distinction that Emerson himself borrows from Coleridge (who almost certainly borrowed it from Kant), idealism sees the world according to Reason, whereas ordinarily we are inclined to see the world according to the Understanding. What Emerson calls idealism is rooted in the tendency of Reason "to relax this despotism of the senses, which binds us to nature as if we were a part of it, and shows us nature aloof, and, as it were, afloat."[297]

> It is the uniform effect of culture on the human mind, not to shake our faith in the stability of particular phenomena, as of heat, water, azote; but to lead us to regard nature as a phenomenon, not a substance; to attribute necessary existence to spirit; to esteem nature as an accident and an effect. […] Culture inverts the vulgar views of nature, and brings the mind to call that apparent, which it uses to call real, and that real, which it uses to call visionary. The advantage of the ideal theory over the popular faith, is this, that it presents the world in precisely that view which is most desirable to the mind. It is, in fact, the view which Reason, both speculative and practical, that is, philosophy and virtue, take. For, seen in the light of thought, the world always is phenomenal; and virtue subordinates it to the mind. Idealism sees the world in God.[298]

From the point of view of idealism, the world appears to us more as God sees it—we see the world as it *wants* to be seen, so to speak— than as we are ordinarily inclined to see it. Accessing

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[296] *Culture*, EL 1:217.
[297] *Nature*, 55.
[298] *Nature*, 60.

such a point of view means at the very least minimizing what is idiosyncratic about the point of view we ordinarily take to be our own, which is to say that the practice of idealism abstracts what Emerson calls "mean egoism" from the world-picture. In such an act of abstraction, the ego does not vanish entirely—it is temporarily transformed. What remains is something like Kant's "abiding and unchanging I" of reflection that Kant himself associates with the transcendental unity of apperception.[299]

The transcendental unity of apperception reveals a thin, wispy version of our ordinary (empirical, non-ideal) self—our transcendental ego which exists "as an intelligence that is merely conscious of its faculty for combination."[300] Such a self "floats" as might a ghost or spirit; it is barely a person—in fact, it is perhaps best thought of as an *impersonal* form. This impersonal, transcendental ego is receptive, but not to ordinary passions, whether one's own or those of others—it is 'moved' by transcendentality itself, that is, through encounters with the elements of transcendental beauty.

> When good is near you, when you have life in yourself, it is not by any known or accustomed way; you shall not discern the footprints of any other; you shall not see the face of man; you shall not hear any name;—the way, the thought, the good shall be wholly strange and new. It shall exclude example and experience. […] In the hour of vision, there is nothing that can be called gratitude, nor properly joy. The soul raised over passion beholds identity and eternal causation, perceives the self-existence of Truth and Right, and calms itself with knowing that all things go well. Vast spaces of nature, the Atlantic Ocean, the South Sea,—long intervals of time, years, centuries,—are of no account. This which I think and feel underlay every former state of life and circumstances, as it does underlie my present, and what is called life, and what is called death.[301]

One might say that in idealism one 'overlooks' aspects of phenomenal reality in the interest of catching a glimpse of the reality that the apparent diversity of phenomena ordinarily tends to obscure. Because that underlying reality is taken to be, in faith, and in accordance with the Platonic imagination, "one," idealism inclines us toward the discernment of transcendental unity upon which the consideration of transcendental truth and goodness of objects in the world—and therefore, ultimately, transcendental beauty considered (as we considered it in Chapter Four) as a harmony among these three transcendentals—might proceed.

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[299] A123.
[300] B158.
[301] *Self-Reliance,* 139.

While Emerson places great importance on the practice of idealism as a means of revealing the presence of the transcendentals and the transcendental ego, he does not dismiss the importance of the empirical ego, too, in the economy of salvation. Not all egoism is, to Emerson's mind, "mean." What distinguishes Emersonian individualism is that what one overlooks in the interest of transcendental unity returns for our consideration under the guise of the empirical ego. Although it is properly figured as an ailment—Emerson refers to egoism as a "goitre" and "distemper"—and, therefore, to some degree, a sin, some trace of ego is, in fact, essential to preserve if the pursuit of transcendental beauty is to avoid falling into excessive idealism and its attendant gnosticism.

> This goitre of egotism is so frequent among notable persons, that we must infer some strong necessity in nature which it subserves; such as we see in the sexual attraction. The preservation of the species was a point of such necessity, that Nature has secured it at all hazards by immensely overloading the passion, at the risk of perpetual crime and order. So egotism has its root in the cardinal necessity by which each individual persists to be what he is. This individuality is not only not inconsistent with culture, but is the basis of it. Every valuable nature is there in its own right, and the student we speak to must have a motherwit invincible by his culture, which uses all books, arts, facilities, and elegancies of intercourse, but is never subdued and lost in them. He only is a well-made man who has a good determination. And the end of culture is not to destroy this, God forbid! but to train away all impediment and mixture, and leave nothing but pure power. Our student must have a style and determination, and be a master in his own specialty. But, having this, he must put it behind him. He must have a catholicity, a power to see with a free and disengaged look every object.[302]

Whatever Emerson might mean by 'being what one is' or 'being there in one's own right,' it is clear that he does not think that such being is fundamentally at odds with "becoming like God." In fact, 'being an individual' might be essential to salvation.

> The height of culture, the highest behavior, consists in the identification of the Ego with the universe; so that when a man says I hope, I find, I think, he might properly say, The human race thinks or finds or hopes. And meantime he shall be able continually to keep sight of his biographical Ego, - I have a desk, I have an office, I am hungry, I had an ague, - as rhetoric or offset to his grand spiritual Ego, without impertinence, or ever confounding them. I may well say this is divine, the continuation of the divine effort.[303]

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[302] *Culture*, E, 1016-17.
[303] *Natural History of the Intellect*, W 12:57.

Idealism may reveal to us a moral tether between ourselves and God, but there is more to salvation than conformity to the moral law. It is the empirical or "biographical ego" that supplements the ideal or "grand spiritual Ego" for Emerson. Personality complements impersonality; to find oneself lacking in one or the other is somehow to be less than perfectly 'who one is.' Thus, a culture of vocation befitting the Church should find a way to incorporate both tendencies which, while perhaps ultimately irreconcilable, might nevertheless be held together in some sort of productive tension.

The reconciliation of such tension is, in the Emersonian imagination, the work of *art*. The work of art—in a double sense, as both a created object and a creative act (the 'work' of art)—is the basic unit of culture. One's life itself is, in fact, taken as a whole, nothing more or less than a work of art. The work of art reflects the radiance of transcendental beauty insofar as it can be reflected in the created world (which is, in a sense, God's primordial work of art).

> The poet, the painter, the sculptor, the musician, the architect seek each to concentrate this radiance of the world on one point, and each in his several work to satisfy the love of beauty which stimulates him to produce. Thus is Art, a nature passed through the alembic of man. Thus in art, does nature work through the will of a man filled with the beauty of her first works.[304]

The artist is effectively a student of nature—a naturalist of sorts. In fact, there is no great difference between a naturalist and what we might, if forced, call a 'culturalist,' which is to say that both nature and culture for Emerson are alike insofar as they reflect transcendental beauty. All creation is beautiful in the same way, albeit to different degrees, and this is true even of at least some expressions of the humanly created works of art that constitute culture.

In Emerson's mind, the unity among the creative arts, scholarship (the liberal arts) and religious worship reflects that they all share beauty in common as their underlying subject matter. When we consider beauty as it is reflected in the moral exertions of the individual human person through his or her life, we are, in terms we have been using throughout this study, discerning God's vocational call. Such discernment is guided by the question: "What would make *my* life (or *this* life) beautiful?" In other words, beauty itself has vocational appeal; in fact, one way to think of the 'vocational' is as the appealing aspect of beauty, perhaps even the 'what it is' that we find appealing about transcendentality itself. The vocational appeal of beauty

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[304] *Nature*, 43.

functions as the 'religious impulse' that inspires the work of art (including the work of art that is *me*); the Church is the school in which this art is studied at the highest level; its priests are properly critics. Indeed, bringing unity to the critical project inherent in the scholarly and priestly offices is a task Emerson sets before himself.

> A scholar was once a priest. But the church clung to ritual, and the scholar clung to joy, low as well as high, and thus the separation was a mutual fault. But I think it a schism which must be healed. The true Scholar is the Church.[305]

The allusion is to Coleridge's claim (in 1832) of the three "silent revolutions" in English history—the first when the professions fell off from the church, the second when literature fell off from the professions, and the third when the press fell off from literature.[306] Emerson here puts forward a proposition that the proper vocation of the Church is the counter-revolutionary act of rejoining the professions such that worship and the arts are practiced in unity under the banner of beauty—which leads us to experience joy in its high form, another name for the delight that one experiences in the presence of beauty. It is in beauty that truth (the purview of the scholar) and goodness (the purview of the priest) are unified.

Prospects

Now that we have, over the course of these five chapters, developed a metaphysics of vocation that is at once Emersonian and Catholic, at least two projects recommend themselves. The first is to use this metaphysics as a scaffolding to assist with the development of an aesthetics of vocation, focused on the experience and understanding of transcendental beauty. Such an aesthetics would establish the topography of what Emerson calls the 'narrow belt' in which the beauty of one's true self, the self whom one is genuinely called to be, is visible upon reflection:

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[305] *The Scholar*, 486 (also known as *The Man of Letters*).
[306] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Specimens of the Table Talk," in *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: With an Introductory Essay Upon His Philosophical and Theological Opinions*, Vol. 6, ed. W.G.T. Shedd (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1884), 39.

> Everything good is on the highway. The middle region of our being is the temperate zone. We may climb into the thin and cold realm of pure geometry and lifeless science, or sink into that of sensation. Between these extremes is the equator of life, of thought, of spirit, of poetry,—a narrow belt.[307]

It would be only after—or at least, as part of the articulation of—an aesthetics of vocation that an ethics of vocation, from which more practical, action-oriented recommendations might be generated for those engaged in vocation *ministry*. For, in the absence of such an aesthetics, one risks falling too easily into the trap of being overly sanguine or romantic about irreconcilable differences or generalized anxiety. What one should want to affirm, from an Emersonian point of view, is a deep sense of ontological and aesthetic instability without having to affirm, begrudgingly or otherwise, unwholesome psychological side effects. The solution, it seems to me, involves reestablishing Emerson's metaphysical *bona fides* after the manner of Joseph Urbas, who has so ably reminded us that we do not fully understand Emerson until we recognize that metaphysics lies behind just about everything he has to say.[308] We need to course correct after these decades of Cavellian influence which, despite its many merits, has left us with a wispy, flaccid and unmoored sense of self that fails to represent the image of human agency that Emerson actually depicts in his life and writings, an image to which one does justice, I think, by bringing to the surface traces of Thomistic Platonism in his work and using them to supplement the more overt Kantian and Romantic insights. The path to new perspectives on Emerson runs surprisingly and, perhaps, somewhat ironically, through Aquinas.

From a Catholic perspective, it would serve both the ecumenical and evangelical missions of the Church if it were to count Emerson among the ranks of its prophetic allies—I am thinking of figures like Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch and Hannah Arendt who inhabit a liminal zone of 'fellow travelers' sympathetic and even friendly to the Catholic cause, who have enriched Catholic refection on a variety of topics, even as their conversions to the Catholic faith remain incomplete. Emerson gives us a North American figure of this order, and with more than a little stature, who can move and think along with the Catholic tradition without ultimately becoming a part of it. Such figures expose issues that might otherwise remain unaddressed—

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[307] *Experience*, 234.
[308] See Joseph Urbas, *Emerson's Metaphysics: A Song of Laws and Causes* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016) and *The Philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

some, like Heidegger and Nietzsche, pose as overtly hostile to the tradition; however, one wonders, where would post-Vatican II theology be without their influence?

With respect to the specific project of developing a Catholic aesthetics of vocation, it would seem to me a promising approach to develop such an aesthetics out of a consideration of what makes a Platonic imagination not only sacramental but distinctively *eucharistic*. There is, it seems to me, no reason not to enlist Emerson in such an effort, for, as we have now seen, it is the 'clinging' to ritual with which Emerson takes issue, not ritual practice as such. Ritual*ism* is ruled out, but Emerson would seem to find perfectly acceptable the idea of a ritual joyfully performed. A culture befitting the Church, for both the Emersonian and the Catholic, would allow for the joyful celebration of the sacraments, as opposed to, say, their rote performance. The Emersonian is, on my interpretation, perfectly free to *celebrate* the sacraments, performed by a priest within the context of a hierarchical Church. To live within such a vocational space means learning how to embrace our freedom and sense of agency without at the same time excluding from that embrace God, neighbor and indeed the world as such.

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