Emerson as a Religious Philosopher

We have come a long way in drafting a substantive interpretation of Emerson’s philosophy, early and late, yet our picture would not be complete should we shy away from a direct discussion of the theme of religion. This is a large and challenging topic, arguably one of the most difficult in all Emersonian thought to try to get reasonably clear about. The first difficulty confronts us already in the meaning of the word ‘religion’. What is religion, and why speak of religion in the first place, and not just, say, of faith? Of course, the spectrum of religious or spiritual concepts and phenomena is broad, extending from terms customarily taken to be somewhat more “institutional”, such as ‘church’, ‘religion’, or ‘Christianity’, to somewhat broader terms possibly more conducive to different and more idiosyncratic interpretations, such as ‘faith’, ‘God’, or ‘spirituality’. While such distinctions are undeniably important in many contexts, it would be in line with Emerson’s views on spirituality to insist, quite simply, on using the word religion as a general term encompassing a wide range of spiritual aspects of life, not reducible to any specific denomination. Without implying that he set out to found a religion of his own, this is the ultimate reason for why it makes sense to speak of Emersonian religion, or an Emersonian understanding of religion.

The question of religion or faith was for Emerson not a marginal one, but perhaps the defining one of all questions. Nothing is deep without religion (JMN 9, 514). Always suppose God (JMN 9, 273). We are born believing. A man bears beliefs, as a tree bears apples. (CW 6 Wsp.)

In his journals, which provide the basis for all the published works, theology is termed the first philosophy, and ethics, in turn, subordinate to theology (JMN 2, 337). Emerson also deplores the Unhappy divorce of Religion & Philosophy (JMN 4, 335). Like William James, he

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1 The text is the current draft of the final chapter of my extensive dissertation Self and World – The New Emerson (due for finishing in 2010). My most sincere apologies for the length and the occasional unfinished & unpolished nature of the piece (as well as the missing references and the bibliography). I do hope, however, that the most central points should be fairly legible, and any comments on them will be greatly appreciated. – H.K.
considers religion the natural and the healthy state of man (JMN 3, 165). More generally, the central Emersonian idea of the inter-dependence of the life of our self and our acquaintance with reality is, at the bottom of it, a “spiritual” idea — and Emerson has no trouble alluding to “spirit” in conjunction with this. According to the central ethico-ontological idea of Nature we cannot know reality, unless we live truthfully and authentically, attending to our everyday life and our relation to ourselves.

In this chapter one of our main objectives will be to elaborate on an Emersonian understanding of religion, and to give the reader some sort of a road map to begin with it may be useful to hint at some of his typical characterizations. In an early journal entry Emerson quotes with approval a definition from the Vedas: ‘What is religion? Compassion for all things which have life.” (JMN 8, 489.) He would largely agree with the definition, in so far as the Emersonian religious impulse involves, broadly speaking, a loving and respectful attitude towards all life and all living things. To be a bit more specific, religion for Emerson means receptivity rather than activity, or perhaps we might say activity combined with receptivity. One of the central problems at the heart of the Emersonian understanding of religion is the question of faith versus works: do we come to know God solely through faith or does this require an act of initiative from ourselves? We shall argue that it requires both. In another journal entry Emerson characterizes religion quite simply — in harmony with the etymological meaning of religere as ‘connection’ or ‘relation’ — as the relation of the Soul to God (JMN 3, 260). More generally, Emerson’s understanding of religion and spirituality is not in the end so far removed from his understanding of morality or ethics. Again, etymology may be helpful: one of the original meanings of the word ‘moral’ is ‘spiritual’, that is, the opposite of ‘sensual’. However, we will not want to make our notion of religion so broad and vague as to encompass nearly everything, thus bereaving the word of any reasonable sense. But the more elaborate meaning of the term will emerge, once we delve into a proper study of Emersonian religion.

What more specific reasons do we have for taking up the topic of Emerson’s philosophy of religion? First, the Emersonian project of self-culture is not perfect without religion: culture, for Emerson early and late, consummates in religion. Second, given the increasing attention given to the question of religion in recent philosophy, not only in the United States, but also, say, in French phenomenology, the time should be ripe to make the argument for Emerson’s philosophical uniqueness consisting, in part, in his radical reconstruction of religion. And third, all the best philosophical interpretations of Emerson so far, including above others Cavell, Goodman, Anderson, and Saito, amount to no more than a secular reading of him. But this is not tenable. To begin with, we shall discuss the three motives in a reverse order.

Lysaker (2008) may be an exception to this. But even his discussion of Emersonian religion is ultimately apologetic. I will come back to this in later footnotes.
Inroads to Emersonian Philosophy of Religion

To introduce the reader, somewhat bluntly, into the question of religion in Emerson, let us begin by the observation that virtually all of the philosophical research available tends to dismiss the religious aspect of his philosophy, even broadly conceived. I am thinking, in particular, of Cavell’s *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes* (2003), Russell B. Goodman’s various essays (1990–2008), George Kateb’s *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (1995), and some books with a broader scope but important chapters Emerson, such as Douglas R. Anderson’s *Philosophy Americana* (2006), and Naoko Saito’s *The Gleam of Light: Moral Perfectionism and Education in Dewey and Emerson* (2004). To be sure, these authors are not completely ignorant of religion, but neither would it be truthful to claim that they would explicitly engage it. To take one example, Cavell is fond of speaking of what he calls a “moral (or religious) urgency” or sometimes “religious or artistic pathos” in Emerson (NUI, 10; AT, 61). However, he finds it “utterly significant” that such an urgency is “not expressed as a separate study to be called moral philosophy, or religious philosophy, or aesthetics” (AT, 61). This may be a reasonable observation on the thought of Emerson, but it also amounts to a confession of inability — or perhaps, a lack of desire, for good reasons — to take up the subject separately. We will try to keep Cavell’s observation in mind.

Some literary Emerson scholars, including Lawrence Buell, have raised the criticism against Cavell that his interpretation tends to ignore the metaphysical, or, say, the Neoplatonic elements in Emersonian thought. While it may not be exactly true to say that Cavell shows no awareness whatsoever of the divine in Emerson, it would be fair to argue, that as far as the content of his actual interpretation goes, he does not have a great deal to say on the theme. Cavell would not explicitly address, say, the Emersonian notion of the over-soul, or his multifarious references to God and the divine. In this regard, Anderson’s and Goodman’s work is more promising, in so far as they at least discuss the Platonic and Neoplatonic elements of Emerson’s thought. When I raised the criticism personally to Cavell in an interview on his philosophy and his interpretation of Emerson (2008), his response was encouraging, albeit somewhat convoluted. I asked him to comment on the absence of the religious in his interpretation, taken in a broad sense, prevalent in the writings of Emerson, and exemplified by his notion of the over-soul:

“It’s a limitation in me, I feel, you’re probably right about that. I’m very weary or suspicious about religion, suspicious in myself, and suspicious in the culture. I’ve forgotten who said this, it’s as if in America religion is treated like a dog. That’s one way to put it. For so long Emerson would be treated as a kind of civil religion. I don’t deny it at all, but I don’t trust it. At least I don’t trust the way I’ve seen it talked about. That’s the negative side; there is a positive side to it as well, and that
is that I want much of what Emerson might have called or might call religion to be something that can be picked up in philosophy. I want the some sort of aspiration to philosophy to not replace exactly, or extend exactly, but to allow itself to be motivated by an aspiration that Emerson would call religious.”

While acknowledging the limitations of his Emerson interpretation in this regard, Cavell’s words find an indirect way of calling for a more intimate tie between philosophy and religion. In essence, he seems to be saying that he would not like a religious interpretation of Emerson to water down the philosophical urgency of his prose. I would agree. Religion in an Emersonian context would have to be something that could, as Cavell puts it, be “picked up at philosophy”. He admits to hoping that philosophy should be allowed to be inspired by something Emerson would call religious. But after the quoted response, Cavell went on to wonder why we should still hang on to the word “religious”, if what we are talking about is “not communal … not ritualistic in some way”. This is the point: Emerson’s view of religion is not communal or ritualistic, but it is still religion. It is religion because it gives reality to an aspect of existence that cannot otherwise be made real. Paying attention to Emerson’s forthcoming albeit critical inclusion of religion in his philosophical project — provided we do this in an equally critical and forthcoming way — makes his philosophy appear more rather than less profound. As we shall argue, religion provides a decisive way of transcending the self-mastery over our lives, which for Emerson is not only ethically but also ontologically of foremost importance.

Regarding the religious aspect in Emersonian philosophy and its alleged absence in philosophical scholarship, Lysaker’s *Emerson and Self-Culture* (2008) makes an important exception to the rule. The book contains a chapter on what its author calls Emersonian “theodicy”, involving a (de)constructive criticism of the divine in the light of Emersonian self-culture. Lysaker’s general take on the subject is that we should move beyond a theological self-culture — not specifically for reasons relating to Emerson, but on more general and contemporary grounds — yet his elaborate discussion of the theme amounts to a host of constructive criticism as well. Lysaker seems to think that religion itself in the long run, as it were, brings about the death of God. *Emerson and Self-Culture* refers somewhat scantily to specific passages by Emerson in this regard, yet the book is in harmony with Emerson’s view that he was living in a transitory period, when religions inevitably were losing their hold over people’s lives. As we have noted earlier, Lysaker’s Emersonian argument calls into question the divinization of Jesus, but does so with an aspiration for divinizing the rest of us. In so far as Lysaker, then, calls for a critical

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3 Cavell also noted that the concept of the Over-Soul had left him cold in some ways, as he finds it “literary”. But then he noted the enthusiasm Nietzsche would have showed for the “over” on the over-
reconstruction of the divine element in Emerson, it may be considered illuminating for his philosophy of religion, but I think more could be made of how Emerson himself carried out the reconstruction.

At any rate, the general aversion of all these scholars to religion may be explained as much by their difficulty in finding a proper philosophical way to it, as by the general intellectual ambiance in American academic philosophy at the time of their writing. For so long, religion has seemed for philosophers a kind of tabu, a discussion of which would somehow lessen your credentials as a philosopher. In the endless aftermath of logical positivism, early analytic philosophy, and post-war pessimistic existentialism, philosophy seemed to have good enough reasons for being weary about religion. Even openly religion thinkers, such as Kierkegaard, are often studied solely secularly. But this raises the question: if we could make the intellectual move that way, from the religious to the secular, still preserving something of the urgency of what we are talking about, why could we not make it the other way as well? In other words, perhaps there are many more philosophers, past and present, whose thinking is implicitly religious, if we only had eyes and words for it. In any event, the situation seems to be changing, and there are, to mention a few prominent American examples, philosophers like Rorty and Putnam to have taken up the topic. A similar shift of thinking has relatively recently taken place in Europe as well, instanced by the so-called “theological turn” in French phenomenology.

Regardless of what we will make of the merits and dismerits of the philosophical Emerson scholarship, it should be apparent that bringing the theme into a focus will give us a clearer picture of Emersonian thought within a broader framework of contemporary philosophy and its history. In particular, the dismissal of Emersonian philosophy of religion appears ironic in the light of some later philosophers most enthusiastic about and inspired by him. Of course, William James had a great deal to say on religion, and the topic was neither foreign to Charles S. Peirce nor John Dewey. Comparisons with Emerson and the classical pragmatists in this regard remain a field virtually uninvestigated, yet it would not be far-fetched to say, given Emerson’s multifarious views on religion, that he may well have inspired some of the religious philosophy of the American pragmatists. Unlike with the classical pragmatists, in the case of Emerson and Nietzsche religion marks a decisive difference rather than another affinity. Much as Emerson may have in common with Nietzsche, a gulf remains between the two, not to be bridged by easy displays of sophistry or acuity, in their respective stances towards religion. I am not saying that Nietzsche may not be more open to spirituality than we would customarily think; he may well be. Nor am I intending to downplay the radicality of

soul.

4 See some people, perhaps people very different from the obvious examples of Levinas and Derrida. [see SP]
Emerson’s critique of religion; it is radical. However, on a simple level of reading their texts, published and unpublished, Emerson has a bulk of insightful and constructive remarks to make on religion, while Nietzsche has only a few. And the recent changes of emphases in what philosophy considers a subject of legitimacy to be studied in the Academia give us some further confidence for arguing that this is an achievement of Emerson.

Not to Work but to the Worked Upon

In order to properly take up the large topic of Emerson’s philosophy of religion, it is appropriate to begin by briefly enumerating and characterizing his various writings that may be taken to have most direct bearing on the subject. First of all, among the very earliest essays Emerson ever wrote and submitted for the Bowdoin essay competition in his student days at Harvard, we find “The Religion in the Middle Ages” (1821). While largely adopting a somewhat stereotypical understanding of the Middle Ages as a period of certain intellectual darkness, the piece is not devoid of interest for a student of Emerson’s views on religion. Secondly, there are the some 50 sermons Emerson gave as a Unitarian preacher (1829–1832), recently published in a complete edition. While the sermons, generally speaking, show the preacher’s immersion in the basic tenets of Unitarianism, they also anticipate some of the more radical views of his later philosophy. Pertaining to his break with Unitarianism, there are, above others, his last sermon in the church he was about to leave, “The Lord’s Supper” (1832), and “The Divinity School Address” (1838). Emerson’s complex and somewhat baffling relation to Unitarianism, beginning with the two texts, has been discussed earlier. Moreover, “Religion” is a quintessential topic in various early lecture series. It is the topic of the sixth lecture in the series “The Philosophy of History” (1836–1837), and the seventh in “The Present Age” (1839–1840). Religion is quite importantly taken up also as the last theme of Emerson’s lectures on “Human Culture” (1837–1838), under the title “Holiness”. In his later philosophy, beginning with The Conduct of Life, virtually every Emersonian work begins to include a chapter on an important and fairly explicitly religious topic, including “Worship” (CW 6), “Immortality” (CW 8), and “The Preacher” (CW 10). Excepting the place of religion, broadly conceived, in his early published works, in particular Nature, Essays: First Series, and Essays: Second Series, these texts, taken together run up to more than 200 pages, and would make an intriguing topic for a thematic collection of Emerson’s writings.

In the context of a substantive interpretation of Emerson’s philosophy, religion occupies a high place in the scale of self-culture. Powerful and all-encompassing as the

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5 See ch. 2. [see 023.doc for a longer discussion still placed at this spot.]
project of Emersonian self-culture may be, the circle is not complete, until culture leads to religion. This is to say that Emerson ultimately understood the religious attitude as the only proper and healthy state of man; without it, our lives verge, as we shall argue in the next section, on something like nihilism. As we have shown, Emerson set exceptionally high expectations on culture, concluding his essay in *The Conduct of Life* with a view of culture as opening *the sense of beauty*, teaching us to embrace and cherish a much wider variety of objects in the world than we may be accustomed to. One of the weightiest statements on the power of culture, paired with its ultimate limitation, may be found near the end of the 1851 manuscript of “Fate”:

*This immense preponderance of the senses, it is the end of culture to balance and redress. Let culture call out the powers. Let the soul awake from its deep sleep, and there shall be new heavens and new earth. Culture should make life appear a gift worthy of omnipotence. Culture should enable one to entertain oneself; culture should teach one to be manly, happy. Culture should make one content with his vocation, his art. Culture should inspire hope, should show good issues remotely proceeding from an evil world; and reconcile cities with thoughts; and the end of culture should be, to make no end. (LL Ft, 253.)*

The end of this passage may be taken to embody what we may call a paradox of self-culture. Self-culture appears to infuse our existence with a meaning, but in the end it will leave our lives open-ended: *the end of culture, should be, to make no end.* Hence, an Emersonian project of culture, taken all the way, appears to lead to something like its own consummation. Indeed, we may find paramount evidence for Emerson considering religion the ultimate goal of culture. In the introduction to the essay “Worship” he notes the previous chapters to have treated *some particulars of the question of culture, while the whole state of man is a state of culture; and its flowering and completion may be described as Religion, or Worship.* In the lecture “Holiness” he notes heroism to be *very attractive,* while holiness is *unattractive,* yet the latter state constitutes *the highest state of man.* He identifies holiness with what he calls a *self-surrender to [the] moral sentiment, the acceptance of its dominion throughout our constitution as the beatitude of man* (EL 2 HC, 346). He characterizes the highest state we may experience as *the act of adoration, the state in which, with perfect lowliness, we aspire* (EL 2 HC, 346). In “Worship” he expresses a similar idea as the *greatness of humility.*

We may quote one further passage from Emerson’s later journals as forcefully advocating the necessity of reaching beyond culture, something Emerson capitalizes as *Culture,* virtually identifying the word with *Religion:*

*Half engaged in the soil, Man needs all the music that can be brought to disengage him. If Love, if War with his drum cannonade, if Want with his lash, if Trade with his money, if Christianity with its Charity, Art with portfolio can set his dull nerves in vibration, &c., by tapping on the
Chrysalis, can break its walls, & let the new creature emerge, erect & free, that is something; that is much; but not all. He is yet the subject of culture only to be the subject of culture again. He has yet clogs, & earth, & fate, to get rid of; he is to shed this poor belly which drags him down. Culture, Religion are to put wings on his feet; wings on his brain. The age of the Belly is to go out, & the Age of the Brain & of the Heart to come in. (JMN 12, 602.)

This text is a cousin to the above quoted final version of the end of “Culture”, which Emerson has, however, drastically toned down from this original journal version. The most remarkable difference is that the published version does not mention Religion: perhaps Emerson the ex-pastor had fears about his views being dubbed religious rather than revolutionary. Contrasted with the published version, the journal entry gives expression to a decisive limitation of culture: self-culture is an endless circle, opening up in infinite directions but never showing a way out of the circle. The only way out will be Culture with a capital ‘C’, paired in the text — probably as being synonymous — with Religion. In this nearly fanatic and somewhat wild passage it may be difficult to say what Emerson exactly means by Culture and Religion, but it is apparent that both are needed.

To clarify the meaning of Emerson’s understanding of religion and its place in human life, then, different texts will need to be examined. A much more substantial place may be found in the essay “Worship”. The essay, like virtually all of Emerson’s religious writings is interesting for its double movement: the text both acknowledges a decay of religion and insists on a new and powerful understanding of it. In spite of our imbecility and terrors, and “universal decay of religion,” &c. &c., the moral sense reappears to-day with the same morning newness that has been from of old the fountain of beauty and strength. Emerson likens the saying that there is no religion to saying in rainy weather that there is no sun. Yet he suggests, with impressive confidence, that there is

principle which is the basis of things, which all speech aims to say, and all action to evolve, a simple, quiet, undescribed, undescribable presence, dwelling very peacefully in us, our rightful lord: we are not to do, but to let do; not to work, but to be worked upon; and to this homage there is a consent of all thoughtful and just men in all ages and conditions.

This text could be taken as one of the vintage Emersonian expressions of the idea that the best part of our lives consists not in self-mastery but in self-surrender. To remind the reader of the different manifestations of the idea, we may quote two divergent sources from his earlier thought. In Nature’s metaphor of the transparent eye-ball … I am nothing; I see all. In “Experience”, The ardors of piety agree at last with the coldest skepticism, — that nothing is of us or our works, — that all is of God.⁶ Considering such divergent examples in Emerson of

⁶ Thirdly, we may mention a very different and much later essay, “The Sovereignty of Ethics”, where
what some commentators have aptly dubbed the idea of receptivity, we should be careful to specify more precisely how this may or may not be an instance of religious experience. I think we may admit two things. Such an experience is very central, if not one of the most central ideas in Emersonian philosophy, and it would by and large be in line with Emerson’s own usage to call such an experience “religious”. His understanding of religion was broad, but this is what makes his view so rich and universal: the meaning of religion is not trivialized but heightened by understanding it as a fundamental ethico-ontological experience. As we suggested earlier, the decisive difference between such an experience and a non-religious experience is that in the former we are surrendering our will to something greater than ourselves.

A critical reader may retort that this is not enough to make the experience religious, as we may well be abandoning ourselves to evil forces or pure blind chance, for that matter. I do not deny the force of such criticism, but I think we should at least be willing to consider the basic Emersonian reply to it as more reasonable than it may appear at first sight. Emerson’s faith in the inherent goodness and divinity of human beings was so profound that he genuinely believed that in an authentic self-surrender we are bringing our souls in unison with God and not with something else. Of course, this does not efface the urgent moral possibility for our acts still failing to hit the mark. But what more profound justification can be given for morality, if it be not based on a set of principles and norms, than the purity of heart? The Emersonian view of religious self-surrender is open to moral scrutiny and criticism, coming from ourselves or from others, for the same reason that makes the idea so fruitful: it relies on an ability to see and not on some preordained sets of rules.

**God’s Resplendent Creation: Emersonian Nihilism**

In my new and variously repeated forays into the Emersonian essays, early and late, there are various things I may still occasionally be struck by, by real and vivid surprise, as if I had not read the essays through and through quite as many times as I have. Some of the things captivating me are old but still exciting, others new and unexpected. One of my newest discoveries is the consistency and the depth of *The Conduct of Life*, and after all, I may be learning to call it Emerson’s greatest book. Among the essays I had earlier only glanced over, somewhat passively registering the voice of the author I thought I already knew, are some that now make an entirely different impression on me. Among them is the sixth essay “Worship”. Let us pause before a sentence. *The race of mankind have always offered at least this implied thanks for the gift of existence, — namely, the terror of its being taken away;*

Emerson elaborates on the idea of abdicat[ing] all choice, ceasing to interfere with the intimacy of me and the world. An imaginary interlocutor in the essay comes only now to discover that there is a power in Nature that can relieve me of my load. But now I see.
the insatiable curiosity and appetite for its continuation. I had not paid much attention to this passage, and now it appears to me one of the most moving in all Emerson’s prose, so much meaning implicit between the lines. “Worship” is one of the most important later essays, and particularly so as regards his philosophy of religion. I am also greatly impressed by the lecture “Holiness”, another much earlier piece by Emerson discussing, as the lecture puts it — analogous to the place of “Worship” in The Conduct of Life — the place and claims of Holiness in the scale of Human Culture.

One remarkable thing about the two texts is that rather than providing a cheerful celebration of religion, they both fully acknowledge what Emerson calls skepticism, in other words, the possibility and tragedy of unbelief. “Worship” begins, in effect, by responding to the reported charges that the earlier chapters of the book discuss their topics on too low a platform, that they give too much line to the evil spirit of the times. However, he has no trouble playing the devil’s attorney, if that should be how his arguments appear. I have no infirmity of faith; no belief that it is of much importance what I or any man may say, he seems to say that a certain truth will be conveyed through his words regardless of which phrases he exactly chooses. More importantly, Emerson notes that he does not fear skepticism for any good soul. A just thinker will allow full swing to his skepticism. Displaying something of his later, obliquely blunt black humor: I dip my pen in the blackest ink, because I am not afraid of falling into my inkpot. And perhaps more to the point: I have no sympathy with a poor man I knew, who, when suicides abounded, told me he dared not look at his razor.

Although, by and large, it would be accurate to say that Emerson was not aware of the problematic of nihilism, at least not to the extent of Nietzsche’s, a careful reader will be able to discover hints of such tendencies in his prose. The beginning of “Worship” we have just quoted as one possible example; some parts of “Holiness” are another. In this forceful and intellectually daring lecture, Emerson sketches the two sad extremes, Superstition and Atheism, between which our being oscillates. Regarding the former, he argues for the impossibility of simply accepting the Tradition with veneration, if our heart contradicts it. Take this. Impossible. This imported faith may varnish whom it will; — it may serve for the indolent, and save thinking; it may serve for seeming; — but for Being, never. In concord with his earlier philosophy of religion, a difference between authentic and inauthentic religiosity is suggested, and Emerson is ruthless as to the latter. It is a quitting the substance for the shadow; a forsaking the God with us that vaticinates ever to the listening soul, — to accept or feign to accept a word that contravenes a sentiment of the heart. But his depiction of the other extreme, of Atheism, is equally worthwhile quoting at length, also included in the later essay “The Preacher”:

Meantime, as unlovely, nay frightful is the solitude of the soul which is without God in the world. To wander all day in the sunlight among the tribes of animals unrelated to anything better; to
behold the horse and cow and bird, and to foresee an equal and speedy end to him and them. No, the bird as it hurried by with bold and perfect flight would disclaim his sympathy and declare him outcast; to see men pursuing in faith their varied action, warmhearted, providing for their children; loving their friends; performing their promises; — what are they to this chill, houseless, fatherless, aimless Cain, the man who hears only the sound of his own footsteps in God’s resplendent creation? (EL 2 HC, 342.)

Emerson’s rhetoric and language may not be quite as powerful as the outbursts of Nietzschean nihilism depicted in The Gay Science following the death of God, yet the basic thrust of the passage is much closer to an existentially real crisis of nihilism than the conventional genteel stereotype of Emerson might suggest. The life of the soul without God depicted in the text is frightful, lonely, aimless, chilly. He is an outcast, houseless, fatherless. In “Worship”, a similar worry condenses into a question: How is that people manage to live on, — so aimless as they are? He does not refer explicitly to nihilism — a term that came into philosophical prominence later — and my argument is by no means intended to suggest that Nietzsche was influenced by Emerson in this regard, yet both the religious and the atheistic undercurrents of Emerson’s prose must be acknowledged.

Emerson’s way of speaking about the existential crisis of atheism is commonly to refer to skepticism, which he appears to understand quite broadly, perhaps not entirely differently from Cavell, for whom skepticism is in essence the human tendency to deny the human.† Halfway in “Worship” skepticism is defined — in the footsteps of Hume, who seems to have influenced Emerson’s views on skepticism a great deal, possibly more than Montaigne — as unbelief in cause and effect. Emerson’s counter-examples involve our eating habits determining our thoughts, and our dealings who we are. As we are, so we do; and as we do, so is it done to us. Although these examples are more specific than the general problematic of religiosity versus atheism, they indicate the possibility of unbelief and hint at the opportunity to overcome it. I am drawing attention to the skeptical passages in Emersonian philosophy of religion to stress the fact that his religiosity is not uncritical or naïve. Returning to the main insight of “Fate”, the connections between causes and effects must be perceived in personal terms, as the fabric and foundation of our life’s fullest potential. Thus the tie of fate becomes alive only in the human mind. The law is the basis of the human mind. From a human perspective, Emerson calls it inspiration, while in nature we see its fatal strength. We call it the moral sentiment. We will have chances to elaborate on the Emersonian notion of the moral sentiment, so suffice it for now to note how he identifies the notion here with fate. Content to note that the skeptical impulse need not be feared, what “Fate” calls the odious facts should be written down coarsely as they stand. Very much like “Experience”, Emerson thus gives in to skepticism. We may well give skepticism as
much line as we can. The spirit will return, and fill us.7

In spite of its confident declarations on the power of the spirit, even amidst skepticism, the bulk of “Worship” is remarkable for recording the double movement, or perhaps we may say the dialectic, between religion and skepticism. After beginning in a skeptical key, the essay makes evident its religious premises. We are born loyal ... We are born believing. A man bears beliefs, as a tree bears apples. This is followed by Emersonian critique and observation of his contemporaneous culture. Nothing can exceed the anarchy that has followed in our skies. The stern old faiths have all pulverized. There is a whole population of gentlemen and ladies out in search of religions. Again, ‘Tis as flat anarchy in our ecclesiastic realms. Judging by historical evidence, this appears to be a reference to the religious liberalism resulting in the 19th century New England from Protestantism gone havoc, exemplified by the nearly self-annihilating movement of Unitarianism. More generally, various Emersonian texts, including “Worship”, record the observation that Emerson felt to be living in a transition period, when the old faiths which comforted nations, and not only so, but made nations, seemed to have spent their force. There are other texts where he would say that the old faiths are passing away, and the new ones have not quite made it there yet. Considering the historical transition from the time of Emerson to that of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, it is intriguing to note that much of Emerson’s writing anticipates what these later authors carry to their full conclusions. The Dostoevskyan idea of the decay of religion leading to a decay in morality is already implicit in Emerson’s works, including “The Divinity School Address” and “Worship”. The fatal trait is the divorce between religion and morality. Again, a depiction of his times perhaps not entirely unrelated to Nietzschean nihilism surfaces, when Emerson refers to his contemporaries succumbing to a great despair, people having corrupted into a timorous conservatism, and believing in nothing. The populations in large cities are godless, materialized, — no bond, no enthusiasm. These are not men, but hungers, thirsts fevers, and appetites walking. How is that people manage to live on, — so aimless as they are? This is a formulation of Emersonian nihilism, in an embryonic form.

But unlike Nietzsche, Emerson finds a solution to the threat of nihilism in a rediscovery of religion itself. This is not to say that he was unaware of the problem; on the contrary, his faith was strong enough to put up with it. So is it really nihilism he was grappling with, if he easily manages to find a way out from it already in the next sentence? A critical reader might argue that the Emersonian perspective into the looming problem of nihilism is in the end naïve, because the most he would allow was for it to linger around a second, until the threat would be washed away by the divine light. But a related criticism may also be turned against Nietzsche. Why is it that the problem of nihilism

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7 Cf. “Experience”: The new statement will comprise the skepticisms, as well as the faiths of society, and out of unbeliefs a creed shall be formed. For, skepticisms are not gratuitous or lawless, but are limitations of the affirmative statement, and the new philosophy must take them in, and make affirmations outside of
appears as a problem in the first place? Do we not need to assume a framework of transcendent justification for the meaning of our lives to begin with, in order to make the disappearance of such other-worldly explanations for life seem a problem? But we have no reason to assume them, if the fundamental Nietzschean premise of the death of God is valid.

To push the point further, it may be argued that from an Emersonian perspective there is no real reason to think that the decay of traditional religions would be a cause for mourning and disaster in the face of abiding aimlessness. Emerson’s whole philosophical project may be understood — one of the last of its kind before the Nietzschean death of God — as giving up the search for transcendent justifications for life; life can have no other-worldly meaning. As we have noted, after his resignation from the post of a Unitarian minister, Emerson launched a furious attack against historical Christianity, but this meant for him by no means giving up spirituality. After we let go of God as a dogma yielding sense to our this-worldly existence, only one alternative remains. Life itself must supply its own meaning. There is no a priori reason why this should be terrifying and not liberating. Why should our abandoning the search for an other-worldly meaning be a cause for grief; why may it not be an impetus for joy? Life may be infinitely meaningful, if we only confer to it all the meaning it deserves.

We have adduced some reasons, then, for taking the Emersonian thoughts on skepticism or Atheism seriously, and seeing as a corollary of this the religious solution he has to offer to the crisis as a real solution. It should be underscored that Emerson did not replace the old religions with another old version of his own, fundamentally nothing changed, but with an entirely new understanding of spirituality. Thus we may read from a critical distance the optimistic hopes of an early lecture “Religion” in the series “The Philosophy of History”: Unbelief never lasts long. It always proceeds out of deepest Belief … Already society sickens of skepticism, and new communities of faith form. Indeed, Emerson’s insight into the transitory nature of religion in his time goes as deep as to register a recurring phenomenon in the history of the churches. Thus speedily the Divine light rekindles in some one or other obscure heart who denounces the deadness of the church and cries aloud for new and more appropriate forms. Given the ex-pastor’s own reference to the sacrament of communion as a dead form, it is difficult not to read this text as an oblique reference to Emerson himself. Thus every church — the purest, — becomes speedily old and dead and only a new church is alive. Or, in the moving language of “Worship”, God builds his temple in the heart on the ruins of churches and religions.

Way out of Unfaith

them, just as much as it must include the oldest beliefs.
Moral Sentiment as Attentiveness

The distinctive outcome of our last section is that in spite of his acknowledgment of the threat of Atheism, Emerson finds a new meaning for life in life itself, in a religious impulse implicit in the framework of our this-worldly existence. To anticipate where the argument will be taking us in the next section and as far as the ontological implications of his philosophy of religion are concerned, Emerson is thinking in the tradition of proto-pragmatism, whose origins we may find in Kant. The characterization must be treated with caution: to dub Emerson’s philosophy of religion pragmatistic is not so much intended as a quip to the pragmatists as it is to stress the non-mystic elements of Emersonian religion, all too often clouded by hazy readings of his religiosity. Furthermore, to be clear from the start about the crucial difference between Emerson and Kant in this respect, the two philosophers are worlds apart in their respective stances towards the other-worldly elements in their discussion of morality. To put the point briefly, for Kant immortality of the soul is a postulate we cannot help thinking, in trying to make sense of the unity of virtue and happiness, and without postulating such a unity, moral action lacks an important element. But Emerson explicitly opposes such other-worldly assumptions in ethics. This is one of the key topics of the early essay “Compensation”, which begins by parodying a sermon by a man esteemed for his orthodoxy, for deferring moral justice to the after-life. The idea recurs in some of the key essays of The Conduct of Life. Other world? There is no other world. God walks with you here, in the present.° (JMN 8, 183).

Of course, Emerson’s works abound with depictions of divinity implicit in the here and now — arguably one of the key insights of all his philosophy. Wherever goes a man, there goes a great soul … When I stamp thro’ the mud in dirty boots, I hug myself with the feeling of my immortality. It is remarkable, then, that his understanding of religion as an antidote to unbelief is not ethereal and other-worldly but quite conducive to a this-worldly interpretation. There are times when he may sound something like a mystic, but more commonly than not even his religious philosophy comes across as being pragmatic; perhaps we may characterize his views as natural religion. At one point in “Worship”, he characterizes religion as our public as opposed to merely private nature. The builder of the heaven has not so ill constructed his creature as that the religion, that is, the public nature, should fall out. This may be taken to suggest that religion is, as it were, ultimately no more than a public expression to what we find true in our private hearts. To take a simple example, the sacrament of marriage is no more than a public complement to a private love that exists between two persons before the sacrament. Religion, understood in an Emersonian vein, must have a real meaning and function in our lives. Thus there is always some religion, some hope and fear extending into the invisible, yet the religion cannot rise above the state of the votary. Perhaps curiously anticipating Zarathustra’s advice that we remain loyal to the earth,
heaven always bears some proportion to earth.

More importantly, Emerson identifies his new vision of religion with what he calls the moral sentiment, an ability to see and judge and make ethical decision in particular situations in life. This makes evident the intimate Emersonian interdependence of ethics and religion; or to push the point further, their virtual synonymity. Before attempting to characterize this central Emersonian notion, some light may be shed on the intellectual sources behind the insight. The notion of “moral sentiment” or “moral sense”, as such, seems to derive most proximally from the Scottish common sense philosophers, above others Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart, whom he read and was influenced by since his student days at Harvard. Secondly, in Emersonian understanding, the term comes very close to what he calls Reason as opposed to Understanding, a distinction he inherits very indirectly from Kant vis-à-vis Coleridge. Reason, in this sense, means something like direct ability to intuit truths, including moral truths, while Understanding refers to our practical dealing with the world. Thirdly, his use of the moral sentiment is obviously related to its Christian underpinnings, particularly to the Quaker idea of God within each one of us, the divine light of conscience that we may attend to in our hearts. The Emersonian notion of the moral sentiment, then, appears at once fairly straightforward, practically speaking, and difficult to grasp, philosophically speaking. What makes the notion particularly challenging is Emerson’s habit of insisting on it either somewhat bluntly or in an unwavering conviction and pathos, in both cases creating the false impression of intellectual immodesty. The way he introduces the idea in “Worship” is a case in point:

We say, the old forms of religion decay, and that a skepticism devastates the community. I do not think it can be cured or stayed by any modification of theologic creeds, much less by theologic discipline. The cure for false theology is motherwit. Forget your books and traditions, and obey your moral perceptions at this hour.

The text may make an important philosophical point, but its direct language verging on stupidity may make the remark appear somewhat superficial. In defense of Emerson, it may be retorted that the straight talk in this case may be understood as a kind of parody of excessive intellectualism — one more display of Emersonian acuity. At any rate, a reader accustomed to sophisticated and convoluted philosophical argumentation should not dismiss the insight only because its expression is blunt. Emerson contrasts a clinging to books and traditions with an ability to obey our moral perceptions at this hour. The text continues by noting that that which is signified by the words “moral” and “spiritual”, is a lasting essence, declaring with confidence that the words will put on their ancient meaning regardless of the illusions we may load on them. Again, the reader should not be misled by
Emerson’s routine of referring to essence in contexts such as these; although the word is intended to draw attention to something he considers of foremost importance and permanent value, it should not be taken to conjure up essentialistic metaphysics. In any event, Emerson’s way of speaking of the moral and the spiritual as an essence should be taken at face value.

I know no words that mean so much. In our definitions we grope after the spiritual by describing it as invisible. The true meaning of spiritual is real; that law which executes itself, which works without means, and which cannot be conceived as not existing. There are many insights hidden into these weighty words, and the idea of the self-realization of the divine again surfaces. Perhaps “Holiness” would shed more comprehensible light on the matter: The moments in life when we give ourselves up to the inspirations of [the moral] sentiment, seem to be the only real life (EL 2 HC, 345). This adds an important ontological element to the ethicoreligious view: following the moral sentiment means to live in touch with reality.

There appear to be essentially two different ways for Emerson to speak about the moral sentiment. On the one hand, he uses the term to refer, quite simply, to our ability to obey our moral perceptions in each particular situation; on the other hand, the term is referred to as embodying a law. The latter aspect is more difficult to understand. In “Worship”, he quotes with high approval a definition of Law from the Vedas, bordering on unintelligible mysticism: “Law it is, which is without name, or color, or hands, or feet; which is smallest of the least, and largest of the large; all, and knowing all things; which bears without ears, sees without eyes, moves without feet, and seizes without hands.” I am not sure if much can be made of the definition, except to note that he seems to have understood it. One quasi-paradox about the moral sentiment, interpreted as a Law, is that a law would customarily be understood as something holding above and beyond particular instances or exceptions of it, while the moral sentiment seems precisely to refer to a certain moral perceptivity, as opposed to rigid lawlikeness. Perhaps Emerson is thinking that what is lawful in all the particular moral situations is that we attend to the same principle of attending to the particularities of the situation in each case. Perhaps a juxtaposition of this with, say, a Levinasian Judaistic notion of the Law, may be helpful.

This brings us to the first sense of the moral sentiment mentioned above, which appears somewhat easier to understand. The moral sentiment is a word for our moral sense, just as reliable as all our other senses, if we only attend to it carefully enough. An important text in this regard is “The Preacher”, where Emerson — as in virtually all his religious texts — central insights circle around the moral sentiment. I fear that what is called religion, but is perhaps pew-holding, not obeys but conceals the moral sentiment. This appears at once as a reason for being weary about religion and as an implicit expression of hope for finding moral sentiment in religion. He considers one lesson of the moral sentiment to be

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8 … but without many of the Platonic-Aristotelian connotations that the terms have become associated with …
an emancipation from that anxiety which takes the joy out of all life. St. Augustine is reputed for saying in his *Confessions* that our souls are restless, until they find a peace in God. For Emerson, the moral sentiment *teaches a great peace. It comes itself from the highest place*. And importantly in the light of what we have just said: *It is a commandment at every moment and in every condition of life to do the duty of that moment and to abstain from doing the wrong*. Perhaps this quote gives expression to both the lawlikeness as well as the particularity of the moral sentiment; it is a *commandment at every moment* … to do the *duty of that moment*. This is what Emerson conceives of as the ground of both religion and morality.

To make the Emersonian notion of the moral sentiment more intelligible in a contemporary context, we may briefly suggest a couple of analogous lines of thought in modern moral philosophy, with which the notion may be most adequately compared. First, we may think of what has come to be called, somewhat misleadingly, “Wittgensteinian moral philosophy”, exemplified by thinkers such as Cora Diamond, Peter Winch, and Iris Murdoch. These philosophers have a great deal to say on the importance of carefully perceiving and fine-tuning ourselves to the particular ethical situations confronting us, both as philosophers and as moral subjects. One central idea surfacing particularly in the work of Murdoch and Diamond is that of “attention” and “attending”; as Diamond argues, it is not so much arguments that matter in moral philosophy as it is our ability to attend to the joys and sufferings of other people. To heighten such attentiveness, we should engage a wide variety of different resources, including philosophy, art, music, and literature.* Diamond refers in this context to English romanticism and to Coleridge, but it does not seem to cross her mind to consider referring to Emerson, who would be a natural American Romantic with very similar insights. Emerson may be taken to share all the three different ideas here only very briefly outlined — those of attentiveness, and the corollary caution with arguments, and of broadening the scope of philosophy, to include religion, among other things.

Secondly, a fruitful point of comparison may be found in contemporary French philosophy, and in particular, in the thought of Emanuel Levinas, who in many ways is not so far from the philosophers we have just alluded to, and not entirely unrelated to American philosophers like Putnam and Cavell either. To mention just a couple of important points of affinity, Levinas also speaks of the importance of acting in accordance with a Law, in our confrontation with others, yet a Law that arises not from attachment to preordained moral principles, but from what he calls our “infinite responsibility in the face of the Other”*. At one point in his writings, Levinas also makes a remark on the word “responsibility”, which would be very much in line with what we have argued; the word “responsibility”, considering its root, means *ability to respond*. Thus

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9 Particularism vs. generalism in metaethics. / Hooker … Moral Particularism … tms [Suomessa Pekka Väyrynen].
a moral philosopher rejecting to construct a system of norms, insisting rather on the urgency of particular moral situations, would not be escaping but emphasizing our sense of responsibility. More should be written on this.

To bring this section to an end, hopefully not overwhelmingly to the reader, there is one more important idea implicit in the Emersonian view of the moral sentiment, which aligns him both with Levinas and Murdoch and Diamond. This is the importance of love. Again, Emersonian ethico-ontological philosophy ends up advocating the unique importance and value of love in our lives. Given the Christian background of his notion of the moral sentiment, this is not surprising; but such a background should not be taken to undermine so much as to fortify the perspective. I will quote an example from all of the three texts discussed in this chapter, “Preacher”, “Worship”, and “Holiness” (I advice the reader to pause for a moment before reading the three quotations, so as to allow them full swing):

 Anything but unbelief, anything but losing hold of the moral intuitions, as betrayed in the clinging to a form of devotion or a theological dogma; as if it was the liturgy, or the chapel, that was sacred, and not justice and humility and the loving heart and serving hand. (CW 10 Pr, 229.)

 But if I command myself, if I help others, if I consent to my own loss for another’s benefit, — straightway I believe in and love man. The intellect rejoices only when it keeps the law of ethics. We demand of it Love. Let it work to cheer all, and say to all, Hope in God; and chill no man and no woman. (EL 2 HC, 344.)

 There is an intimate interdependence of intellect and morals. Given the equality of two intellects, — which will form the most reliable judgments, the good, or the bad hearted? “The heart has its arguments, with which the understanding is not acquainted.” … The bias of errors of principle carries away men into perilous courses, as soon as their will does not control their passion or talent. Hence the extraordinary blunders, and final wrong head, into which men spoiled by ambition usually fall. Hence the remedy for all blunders, the cure of blindness, the cure of crime, is love. “As much love, so much mind,” said the Latin proverb. The superiority that has no superior; the redeemer and instructor of souls, as it is their primal essence, is love.

Living Faith and Emersonian Pragmatism

To prepare this chapter for a conclusion, it is in place to put into a broader context some of the ontological ideas, relating particularly to the existence of God, implicit in Emerson’s religious philosophy. Although I think, and agree in this respect with Cavell, that the proto-pragmatistic aspect of Emersonian thought should be treated with caution or at least seen in the broader context of all the different systems of philosophy he was a
heir and a precursor to, I think his philosophy of religion may be fruitfully read as being part of the pragmatistic tradition, beginning with Kant, and including, most well-known of all the pragmatist philosophers of religion, William James. This is not intended as an argument for direct influence between Emerson on James, nor for Emerson’s intimacy with Kant in this particular regard. What we do wish to draw attention to, however, is the sense in which philosophical questions, including the one concerning the existence of God, are largely bereaved of their traditional meanings for Emerson, as they are no longer examined independently of our human contribution to them, whatever that would mean, but rather seen as dependent on the way we as human beings relate to them.

Without forcefully impinging the impression on the reader that Emerson is a pragmatistic philosopher of religion, let me suggest some natural reasons for such an interpretation. Even though he was keen on referring to quasi-mystical notions such as the One, the Over-Soul, and the Law, he was no mystic, precisely because he was also pragmatic. Whatever terms from various traditions he put to use in his religious philosophy, he always interpreted them so as to give them some real and practical meaning as to how they make a contribution to our lives. To be sure, there is some more direct evidence of Emerson considering himself a pragmatist of some kind, particularly regarding his philosophy of religion, and at one point in his journals he goes as far as to refer to himself in this regard as a practical idealist (JMN 5, 135). In “Worship”, he insists on replacing sentimentalism by realism, by which he means uncovering those simple and terrible laws which, be they seen or unseen, pervade and govern. It may be argued that even Emerson’s somewhat vague notion of a moral Law pervading the fabric of the Universe is pragmatic in so far as it gives expression to a regularity in nature that is empirically real. I find the omnipresence and the almightiness in the reaction of every atom in Nature. His philosophy of the divine appears to be compatible with a far-reaching naturalism, although this may sound at times vague. And so I look on those sentiments which make the glory of the human being, love, humility, faith, as being also the intimacy of Divinity in the atoms.

To adduce further evidence for a pragmatistic reading of Emerson’s philosophy of religion, and to suggest further senses in which this ties in with his sense of the reality of Atheism and not only of Theism, we may study a journal entry from the year 1831:

*The Bible seems all folly to one man & wisdom to another; this is exactly what it says “they are foolishness unto him.”* He has not that in his mind which is like divine truth. God in us worships God. God /

Count it not strange if the fool should say there is no God. The without-God say all is without God. True, true them there is none. They are on the edges & outskirts & broken heaps without form or order of his creation. They are his, they blaspheme him with lips he made, & turn his life against him. But all things are without order to him. (JMN 3, 273.)
This is one of the most explicit texts in all Emersonian prose on what we may term existential relativism. For the Godless it is true to say that for them there is no God. Yet for those who have divinity in them, there will be God; God in us worships God. A similar idea, also in a pragmatistic vein, comes to the fore in passage in “Worship”, which should be set alongside the quoted text:

Why should I hasten to solve every riddle which life offers me? I am well assured that the Questioner, who brings me so many problems, will bring the answers also in due time. Very rich, very potent, very cheerful Giver that he is, he shall have it all his own way, for me. Why should I give up my thought, because I cannot answer an objection to it? Consider only, whether it remains in my life the same it was. That only which we have within, can we see without. If we meet no gods, it is because we harbor none. If there is grandeur in you, you will find grandeur in porters and sweeps. He only is rightly immortal, to whom all things are immortal.

In both of the two texts, Emerson sketches what we may term an ethico-ontological understanding of our relation to the divine, and in particular, to the existence of God. If we meet no gods, it is because we harbor none. In order to experience the reality of God, it does not suffice that we simply sit passively and wait; we must do something to get there. The very notion of the existence of God does not make sense unless we investigate it in relation to a human subject seeking to experience its reality. This does not mean that God’s existence could still not be fully real, and in some sense even transcendent to human experience; just like our ability to perceive different colors depends on our receptivity to certain wavelengths of light, so also the reality of God, for us, is contingent on our receptivity to Him. Heaven deals with us on no representative system. Souls are not saved in bundles. The Spirit saith to the man, ‘How is it with thee? thee personally? is it well? is it ill?’ This passage from “Worship” may be read as Emerson calling into question the Catholic-Orthodox idea of exemplary saints and our belief in them paving the way for our redemption. On another level, the text calls into question his own idea of representativeness. As far as the state of our soul is concerned, the question will have to be confronted by each one of us individually in personal terms. However, the view also brings Emerson closer to Orthodoxy as opposed to Protestantism, in so far as it draws attention to our own stake at our redemption. More generally, this is connected to a courage to think critically, even with respect to religion — one of the important ideas that Emerson did inherit from Protestantism — and various lines of his thought come together in the following journal entry, again from 1831:

Suicidal is this distrust of reason; this fear to think; this doctrine that ‘tis pious to believe in others’ words, impious to trust entirely to yourself. To think is to receive. Is a man afraid that the faculties which God made can outsee God — can find more than he made or different — can
bring any report hostile to himself? To reflect is to receive truth immediately from God without any medium. That is living faith. To take on trust certain facts is a dead faith — inoperative. (JMN 3, 279.)

To go back to the two texts quoted before the last one, we may see in an incipient form another example of why Emerson should be considered some kind of an internal realist. God is real to a believer but unreal to an unbeliever. No man but a spiritual man can know what heaven means, or see the evidence there is for its being. This idea from another journal entry of 1831 is followed by Emerson drawing a distinction between a brutal fellow and ‘the Saints’, with whom the former makes merry, asking to what end they wear grave faces & make prayers & read books. From the perspective of the brutal fellow, he alone seems to have reason, while the actions of the saints appear insufferably tedious & hypocritical. Yet — and here is a version of internal realism — their enjoyments from these things are as real to say the least as he gets from the taste of food or of liquors which he relishes. (JMN 3, 273–274.) In other words, God is just as real as anything we may receive through our senses, and his reality being contingent on our lives makes it no less real than a liking for wine makes wine as such less real to people disliking it. Only the pure in heart shall see God (see J 4, 90; 5, 298 (be God); 12, 241). Emerson’s philosophy of religion may be understood as infinite interpretation of this simple phrase. Only the religious can expect the succor of religion (JMN 9, 199, 200).

The third last paragraph of “Worship” takes the discussion to a more general level, returning us to the topics we have spent our time with in this chapter:

And so I think that the last lesson of life, the choral song which rises from all elements and all angels, is, a voluntary obedience, a necessitated freedom. Man is made of the same atoms as the world is, he shares the same impressions, predispositions, and destiny. When his mind is illuminated, when his heart is kind, hethrown himself joyfully into the sublime order, and does, with knowledge, what the stones do by structure.

Eternity as Immortality

To bring our extensive discussion of Emerson’s later philosophy into a close, we shall conclude our meditation on his philosophy of religion with remarks on immortality. The choice of the subject is motivated, first and foremost, by the fact that the last book of essays published in Emerson’s lifetime, Letters and Social Aims, ends with the essay “Immortality”, which may be considered one of his most remarkable later texts. I say this in awareness of the somewhat problematic question of authorship versus editorship of the book, and in particular, its concluding essay. Among all the Emersonian texts, the published version of “Immortality” is arguably the only seriously corrupt essay — based
on the evidence gained from comparative research into the published and the manuscript version of the text. Even the question whether Emerson himself fully agreed with the inclusion of the essay in the book is not completely settled: the editor J. E. Cabott states in the Preface to First Edition all of the passages in the book to stem from Emerson, yet “it may be a question exactly how far he sanctioned it” (xiii). From Emerson's views on immortality, we know that publishing conclusions, let alone pretending to present watertight evidence for immortality was anything but straightforward, so we the readers must also treat the essay with care. To add to the confusion — and this is what makes the role of the editors more questionable than in the case of “Fate” or “The Natural History of the Intellect” — the alterations of “Immortality” by the editors were perhaps affected by their personal opinions rather than problems inherent in the original manuscript itself. Indeed, a close look into the manuscript reveals that particularly the second editor, Ellen Emerson, wished his father to have thought on the subject in more orthodox and conventional terms than he actually did (see Johnson 1984).

However, it cannot be denied that immortality is one of the philosophical subjects to have attracted Emerson's attention fully only in his later years. To be precise, he showed some interest in the topic already in his youth, and the remarks on immortality to be found in the journals span a time period of roughly 45 years (approximately from 1825 to 1870). While the earliest observations are often concerned with the Christian notion of immortality, we may also find some early statements resembling his mature views. I feel that the affections of the soul are sublimer than the faculties of the intellect. I feel immortal. And the evidence of immortality comes better from consciousness than from reason (JMN 3, 25). As in his mature philosophy, Emerson seems to think in this passage from 1826 that it is human experience of and longing for immortality that is the heart of the matter — rather than abstract and articulate reasoning. If there is a wish for immortality, and no evidence, why not say just that? — this text we have quoted earlier in conjunction with Montaignesque skepticism. In general terms, Emerson is not so much interested in the theological questions of what happens to the soul and the body after death, whether they enjoy an afterlife such as suggested by Christian dogmas, as he is striving to make sense of the phenomenon of immortality and our this-worldly experience of it. In the broader context of his philosophy, he is concerned not only with human immortality but also the way in which the events of our lives may put on “immortality” by being transfigured, as he says in “The American Scholar”, through our thoughtful activity. Thus the events in our private history lose their adhesive, inert form, and astonish us by soaring from our body into the empyrean, and the corruptible has put on incorruption. Indeed, as we shall see, such a transfiguration of life's events is ultimately not very different from what Emerson is getting at with his notion of immortality. He only is rightly immortal, to whom all things are immortal.

The first remarkable observation about the essay “Immortality” is that its phrasing
the question concerning the eternal life within the confines of this-worldly experience also involves an acknowledgment of the reality and naturalness of death. In Walt Whitman’s critique, Emersonian philosophy suffered from the absence of two fundamental human phenomena, sex and death, yet the essay on immortality touches importantly on death in its beginning pages. According to Emerson, the early nineteenth century, under the shadow of Calvinism and of the Roman Catholic Purgatory, was more obsessed with death than his contemporaries, and thus he records in the essay a revolution in opinion. Inverting the ancient catchphrase memento mori, he alludes to a wise man of his time to have ordered a contrary inscription, “Think on living”, on his tomb, suggesting an obvious but all too easily forgotten emphasis. To sum up his view, he quotes two concise lines from Beaumont and Fletcher: “The name of death was never terrible / To him that knew to live.” In linking the fear of death with the inability to follow the duties of today, Emerson virtually anticipates the notion of death drafted by Heidegger in Being and Time, according to which anxiety before death only records our anxiety before our own authentic existence. On the borders of the grave, to the contrary, the wise man looks forward with equal elasticity of mind, or hope; and why not, after millions of years, on the verge of still newer existence? Discussion of death leads Emerson, then, to the main conviction of the essay: that life is forever new, and that intelligent beings are bestowed with the gift of witnessing and joyously celebrating this perpetual newness.

The Emersonian support for the reality of immortality is not thus supplied by reasoned argument or church history, but by the experience of the infinity of life itself. The ground of hope is in the infinity of the world; which infinity reappears in every particle, the powers of all society in every individual, and of all mind in every mind. This suggests that his view of immortality is based in some sense on his very general idea of representativeness: infinite unity reappearing in diverse variety, the universe in a drop of water. In existential terms, “Immortality” articulates some of the most determined statements in any Emersonian prose on the immensity of the life we lead in the world. To take a fairly simple ethical example, every really able man, in whatever direction he work, … if you talk sincerely with him, considers his work, however much admired, as far short of what it should be. Following this, Emerson alludes to his favorite metaphor of the flying Ideal, asking rhetorically — in more explicit religious terminology than he customarily would — if it be anything but the perpetual promise of his Creator. Such ethico-existential observations on something higher and unattained being contained within every human being, also find more ontological formulations, stressing that there is something larger in life than our cherishing of particular moments. The love of life is out of all proportion to the value set on a single day, and seems to indicate, like all our other experiences, a conviction of immense resources and possibilities proper to us, on which we have never drawn. Infinite realities are concealed within ourselves, and though their realization is a deeply ethical task, what lends them distinctive ethical importance is
their ontological reality. One of the later climaxes of the essay is built around ethico-ontological ideas, suggesting that our self-overcoming, a perpetual ascension, becomes possible precisely by virtue of higher selves being contained within us:

Here are people who cannot dispose of a day; an hour hangs heavy on their hands; and will you offer them rolling ages without end? But this is the way we rise. Within every man’s thought is a higher thought, — within the character he exhibits to-day, a higher character. The youth puts off the illusions of the child, the man puts off the ignorance and tumultuous passions of youth; proceeding thence puts off the egotism of manhood, and becomes at last a public and universal soul. He is rising to greater heights, but also rising to realities; the outer relations and circumstances dying out, he entering deeper into God, God into him, until the last garment of egotism falls, and he is with God, — shares the will and the immensity of the First Cause.

This text may be taken as a summary for much of what we have been arguing in the course of our investigation. To begin with, it emphatically voices the Emersonian-perfectionist vision of self-overcoming, the reality of a higher self within our present self, which renders possible our ascension to higher platforms of existence. Yet here we may also clearly see why a purely secular reading of Emerson inevitably falls short of what he so often has to say: it may reach as far as to admit that I am a public and universal soul, but that this actually means a personal acquaintance with God it will be unable to fully express. We must stress that this is how Emerson ultimately understands realism and acquaintance with reality, what is most authentically and experientially real to us; it is nothing less than the merging of our will with the infinity of God, an absolving not of our personality but of egotism. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the entire Emersonian project of philosophy is that he somehow manages to hold and articulate such a view and yet give it clear and practical content. His vision of life is wildly ecstatic and as such verging on madness; yet his simple insistence on how the vision ultimately means nothing but overcoming egoism and striving to do genuinely ethical deeds in our everyday interactions with people makes the outlook fully intelligible. He has no trouble appealing to God and divinity in such contexts — this is indeed how he often phrases the matter — yet his notion of God is nothing foreign and external to the human realities themselves; on the contrary, it is only a name to the general and universal will acting in particular ethical situations, the sum total of whatever will be good for the harmony of souls facing one another amidst the oddities of life.

While dealing with such large matters, it is striking that “Immortality” is actually one of the less pathetic and hyperbolic of Emerson’s essays. At various points in the essay, he stresses how his views are not instances of weakness and sentimentality, but quite coarse and necessary realities of life. My idea of heaven is that there is no melodrama in it at all; that it is wholly real. He explains his emphasis on conscience and experience: this is no
speculation, but the most practical of doctrines. The Emersonian vision of heaven realized on earth is practical precisely because his experience, more than anything else, provides abundant evidence for it. A simple illustration of this might be a person acting in accordance with such ideals, with an experiential sensitivity to them, and in actual fact managing to be virtuous in everyday interactions with others, even from a third-person point of view. In addition to ethical and existential examples, “Immortality” also makes use of epistemological examples, and in fact a large portion of the essay — though much of the material relating to this in the manuscript was effaced by the editors from the essay version — is concerned with what in the lecture version apparently carried the title “Evidence from Intellect”. In short, all our intellectual action, not promises but bestows a feeling of absolute existence. We are taken out of time and breathe a purer air. Perhaps somewhat like the Husserlian phenomenologist, Emerson holds that all perception of truth is in some sense absolute and self-sufficient, in so far as it is based on first-person testimony from experience. While we may of course criticize such a view on the grounds of leaving too much room for self-deception, we may also revert the argument and ask if any grasping of truths is possible except from a first-person perspective.

To wrap up the Emersonian view of immortality, then, it must first be noted that in spite of being a religious notion bordering on mysticism, the view shares some important features with the pragmatistic ways of thinking. Just like William James in his short essay “Human Immortality”, Emerson is concerned more with the wish for immortality, the impulse which drives men to the inquiry and provides in itself affirmative evidence for the view, than the argumentative justification for and against the doctrine. Though the thrust of Emerson’s essay is elsewhere, he would largely agree with James in calling immortality “one of the great spiritual needs of man”, and in stressing the “inner significance” of life, alien lives no less than our own. Even more strongly so than James’s, Emerson’s views on immortality have ultimately to do with eternity rather than (personal) immortality, let alone an afterlife high in the heavens. Here as elsewhere in his thinking on spiritual matters, his emphasis is neither on Western nor Eastern ways of thinking but on both. It is curious to find the selfsame feeling, that it is not immortality, but eternity, — not duration, but a state of abandonment to the Highest, and so the sharing of His perfection, — appearing in the farthest east and west. In a word, Emerson seems to adopt a version of the notion of eternity experienced in the here and now, touched upon by philosophers as diverse as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein. Yet the notion is not sentimental, but is grounded in the necessities and forces we possess. Nothing will hold but that which we must be and must do. We may see again how the reality of fate surfaces in a spiritual context.

10 Cf.: The Revival that comes next must be preached to man’s moral nature, & from a height of principle that subordinates all persons. It must forget historical Christianity and preach God who is, not God who was … It must preach the Eternity of God as a practical doctrine.
Finally, amidst the abundant affirmative evidence for the phenomenon of immortality experienced as eternity and infinity, we must keep in mind that Emerson’s discussion of the topic is ultimately antidogmatic rather than dogmatic, and in some sense even agnostic. The essay makes only occasional reference to God or Jesus, yet the references say much of what he is getting at. Jesus, in speaking of eternity, *is never once weak or sentimental; be is very abstemious of explanation, and be never preaches the personal immortality.* Thinking in unorthodox terms, in all likelihood to the great discomfort of the editors, Emerson denies Jesus to have propounded a doctrine of personal immortality; he *explained nothing, but the influence of him took people out of time, and they felt eternal.* The legitimation of belief in immortality is ultimately fideistic rather than evidentialist, and not necessarily theistic. *I am a better believer, and all serious souls are better believers in the immortality, than we can give grounds for.*

A close reading of “Immortality” reveals that this is one the very few places in any Emersonian texts where he actually calls for belief and faith, wanting the conclusive evidence.

According to the legends, the troubadour knights in the Middle Ages kept alive a concept of immortality in isolation from the church dogmas, which granted such a privilege only to those embracing the dogmas. In a concluding passage from “Immortality”, where the editors of course effaced the most intriguing part relating to this, Emerson once more appeals to enduring love, at once masculine and feminine, and the connection with the troubadours finds most intriguing phrasing:

*We cannot prove our faith by syllogisms. The argument refuses to form in the mind. A conclusion, an inference, a grand augury, is ever hovering; but attempt to ground it, and the reasons are all vanishing and inadequate. You cannot make a written theory or demonstration of this as you can an orrery of the Copernican astronomy. ’Tis the Gai Science, must be sacredly treated. Speak of the mount in the mount. Not by literature or theology, but only by rare integrity, by a man permeated and perfumed with airs of heaven, — with manliest or womanliest enduring love, — can the vision be clear to a use the most sublime.*

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11 Emerson also appeals to Goethe, who also seems to underwrite the view that trying to dogmatically bolster up in cockney fashion that inward assurance lands us in contradiction, and he names Wordsworth’s Ode to Immortality the best modern essay on the subject.