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Hindu concept of fundamental unity by Emerson's philosophy about India

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Abstract
Emerson started to read about Indian philosophy and mythology in The Edinburgh Review between 1820 and 1825. His interest in Indian thought grew when he was a young Harvard graduate, and it continued until the end of his writing career. We see its evidence in many of his essays, poems, letters, and journal entries. For example, the concept of Brahma plays a central role in his works and ideas. He is also very much interested in the Bhagavad Gita. Some of his essays such as "Self-Reliance" deal with a theme that is very much similar to the concept of karma. Through a discussion of Brahma, the Bhagavad Gita, and the laws of karma, I explore how Emerson was deeply influenced by the Indian philosophical and religious thought. The Indian concept of Brahma had great influence on Emerson. Brahma is the god of creation, and one of the Hindu trinity-others being Visnu, the preserver and savior of the world, and Siva, the destroyer or dissolver of the world. Emerson was so influenced by the concept of Brahma that he named one of his short poems "Brahma:" If the red slayer think he slays, Or if the slain think he is slain, They know not well the subtle ways I keep, and pass, and turn again. Far or forgot to me is near; Shadow and sunlight are the same; the vanished gods to me appear; And one to me are shame and fame.

Keywords: mythology, Harvard, Bhagavad Gita, karma, brahma, Visnu

Introduction

Emerson entered the Boston Latin School in 1812, when he was nine years old. The main object of the Latin school was to prepare boys for college and the major subjects were Latin and Greek. Emerson found the outdoors to be far more interesting than the schoolroom, and this preference for nature over books are seen later in his writings, in his romantic attachment to nature, and more specifically in a great curiosity about all branches of science. More than twenty years later, he wrote about his education at Latin school. 'The four college years and the three years course of Divinity have not yielded me so many grand facts as some idle books under the bench at the Latin school.(Emerson, R.W 33) Both at home and at school, Emerson was encouraged to continue his rhyming exercises by his teachers and his family. "To think that he was a poet gave him his first pride in authorship and the confidence he needed.'(Gay IX) He was not good at games and only a mediocre student in his studies. It is to be noted that he had composed an elegy for his grandfather, John Haskins, who died on October 27, 1814:

> While round him gathered, all his children stand
> And someone holds his withered, pallid hand,
> He bids them trust in God, nor mourn, nor weep;
> He breaths religion, and then falls asleep.
> Then on angelic wings he soars to God,
> Rejoiced to leave his earthy, mortal load;
> His head is covered with a grow of gold,
> His hands, renewed, a harp Immortal hold;
> Thus clothed with light, the tuneful spirit sings –
> He sings of mercy and heavenly things. (Gay IX)

This poem shows his quality as a poet even though it was written while he was still a kid.

In the winter of 1814, the Emerson family shifted to Concord which was only twenty miles away from Boston. Ralph Waldo Emerson liked to attend school in Concord as his teachers praised him for his poetic compositions. They also frequently asked him to recite them in the classroom. In the winter of 1816-17, Ralph Waldo Emerson began to develop disturbing sensations in his dreams. He also started to have daytime fantasies. This he recorded in his journal:

> The age of puberty is a crisis in the life of a man worth studying. It is the passage from the consciousness to the conscious, from the sleep of the passions to their rage.(Gilman *et al.* 348)

Emerson got admitted to Harvard College in September 1917. At the age of fourteen, he 'was the youngest member of the Harvard class of 1821.' (Perry 12) William Edward and later Charles competed for academic honours but Ralph Waldo Emerson lacked the competitive spirit. For Emerson, sibling rivalry was either so faint or so well concealed that it appears to have been almost nonexistent. Life in the dormitories was both primitive and rowdy. The students had to provide their own firewood as the rooms were heated by fire places. The only source of water in the hostel was a pump in the yard.

The college yard and dormitories were noisy at night. Yet the rules of the college assumed all the students to be gentlemen.

His boredom in college caused Emerson to begin his second education at Harvard in books not assigned, or even approved, by his tutors. William got him a copy of Byron's *Child Harold's Pilgrimage*. The book introduced him to contemporary British Poetry which was never mentioned in the classroom. He also read books about Shakespeare, Montaigne, Swift, Addison and Sterne.

At the end of the summer of 1818, Emerson taught in his uncle Samuel's School for several weeks. In his sophomore year in Harvard, Emerson joined the Pythologian club. It was a literary or debating society. This club helped him in acquiring his second education at Harvard. It was when he reached college that Emerson insisted on being called Waldo instead of Ralph. He even started signing as Waldo as he preferred his middle name. In his junior year, Ralph Waldo Emerson decided to drop his first name and his family and friends agreed henceforth to call him Waldo. He offered no explanation except his strong preference for his middle name. This was because Emerson had six cousins named Ralph Two cousins were from his mother's side and four were from his father's side.

Even as a child he was an individualist and this similarity of names with his cousins makes him difficult to attain an identity of his own. This shift of name Waldo makes very important psychological changes in young Emerson. He was beginning to outgrow the daydreaming adolescence of his unpromising childhood. Moreover the name Waldo had an emotional appeal to him. It was probably because his Waldo ancestors were Waldensians who fled to England in the seventeenth century to escape persecution in Europe for their protestant religion. He began to act as if he had acquired a new identity. Emerson began keeping a journal on January 25, 1820. He called his first journal "Wide world." This recorded and aided his intellectual growth as a writer.

Hindu concept of fundamental unity

Emerson started to read about Indian philosophy and mythology in The Edinburgh Review between 1820 and 1825. His interest in Indian thought grew when he was a young Harvard graduate, and it continued until the end of his writing career. We see its evidence in many of his essays, poems, letters, and journal entries. For example, the concept of Brahma plays a central role in his works and ideas. He is also very much interested in the Bhagavad Gita. Some of his essays such as "Self-Reliance" deal with a theme that is very much similar to the concept of karma. Through a discussion of Brahma, the Bhagavad Gita, and the laws of karma, I explore how Emerson was deeply influenced by the Indian philosophical and religious thought. The Indian concept of Brahma had great influence on Emerson. Brahma is the god of creation, and one of the Hindu trinity—others being Visnu, the preserver and savior of the world, and Siva, the destroyer or dissolver of the world. Emerson was so influenced by the concept of Brahma that he named one of his short poems "Brahma:" If the red slayer think he slays, Or if the slain think he is slain, They know not well the subtle ways I keep, and pass, and turn again. Far or forgot to me is near; Shadow and sunlight are the same; the vanished gods to me appear; And one to me are shame and fame. They reckon ill who leave me out; when me they fly, I am the wings; I am the doubter and the doubt, And I the hymn the Brahmin sings. The strong gods pine for my abode, and pine in vain the sacred Seven; But thou, meek lover of the good! Find me, and turn thy back on heaven. (665) in this poem, Emerson describes the mystery of Brahma. It is almost impossible for humans to understand the "subtle ways" of Brahma because his character is beyond human comprehension. However, at the end of the poem, we see the light of hope because humans can find him although "strong gods" look for him "in vain." This is the human supremacy, and as Brahma assures, anybody who is the "meek lover of the good" can find him. I shall now briefly discuss the concept of Brahma in order to shed light on its influence on Emerson.

Three concepts crucial to understanding Brahman are: para and apara Brahma, Atman, and maya. There are two forms of Brahm: para and apara Brahman, one is the formed and the other formless. In the Upanisads, the formed is described as unreal and the formless as real. The Brhadaranyaka Upanisad states that "Truly, there are two aspects of Brahman, the formed and the formless, the mortal and the immortal, the unmoving and moving, the existent and that which is beyond existence" (qtd. in Herman 107). The immortal Brahma enters into the mortal Brahma. When this happens, a human—a mortal Brahma—becomes united with the immortal. In this way, humans can be united with the "formless" Brahma, which can be difficult even for the strong gods. This idea resonates with Emerson's belief that man can achieve the majesty of God. In the "Divinity School Address" he says: The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul. These laws execute themselves. They are out of time, out of space, and not subject to circumstance. Thus, in the soul of man there is a justice whose retributions are instant and entire. He who does a good deed, is instantly ennobled himself….If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God do enter into that man with justice. (Emerson 131) Thus, Emerson believes that humans can achieve the immortality of God by good deed and justice. This is also a way of union between the formed and formless Brahma.

Another metaphysical concept of Brahma is Atman, which is synonymous with the Supreme Self or Spirit. It is similar to the Christian notion of Light, Christ, or Spirit, as seen in St. Paul's words, Galatians, "[I]t is not I who live but Christ that liveth in me" (qtd. in Herman 110). Atman is the impersonal God, godlikeness, or the power of creation in the universe, which is found in all beings. The Upanisads mentions that "It is by seeing, hearing, reflecting, and concentrating on one's essential self (atman) that the whole world is known," and that "The atman is below, above, to the west, east, south, and north; the atman is, indeed, the whole world" (qtd. in Hamilton 30). We see this conception of atman in Emerson's "Divinity School Address," in which he says that: Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul….He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his world. He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, "I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or, see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think." (134) Defying the historical Christianity, Emerson

maintains that like Jesus Christ any individual can attain this "sublime" divinity because all human beings share the same Supreme Self.

In addition, Emerson constructs his own God and names Him the Over-Soul. He believes that the nature of the relationship between the Over-Soul and the individual is one-to-one. There is no place for any mediators, such as churches or priests, in this sacred and organic relationship. He describes the Over-Soul as the Eternal One. It is a common soul in which "every man's particular being is contained." It is synonymous with the reality, the divine, the universal heart, the Unity, the supreme critic, the universal presence, and the Holy Spirit. In "The Over-Soul," Emerson contemplates that "the Maker of all things and all persons stands behind us and casts his dread omniscience through us over things" (Emerson 217). In this essay, he emphasizes the notion of unity, and hopes that the union of the individual soul with the Over-Soul will benefit humans more than anything else. The idea of Maya is probably most important for understanding the concept of Brahma and its influence on Emerson. In its simplest form, Maya means a magical power in which the Creator reveals Himself and the mystery of His creation. A. L. Herman describes Maya as: The means by which nirguna, or higher, Brahman is enabled to manifest Itself as saguna, or lower, Brahman, is called maya […] The Upanisads answer this all-important cosmological question about origins by indicating simply that the power or maya of God made all this. While all creation comes forth from the Unmanifest and Imperishable, it is the Great Lord or Isvara who does the actual creating, and does it with this maya. (108) Maya has a double meaning because it is simultaneously a product of power of creativity and the power itself. The Svetasvatara Upanisad says, "Know that nature (prakrti) is maya and that the user of maya is great Isvara. And the whole world is filled with beings that are part of him" (qtd. in Herman 109). The concept of Maya is also related to that of atman, where all beings of the world are seen as parts of the Supreme Being. This concept of Maya always fascinated Emerson. He named one of his short poems "Maia:" Illusion works impenetrable, Weaving webs innumerable, Her gay pictures never fail, Crowds each on other, veil on veil, Charmer who will be believed By Man who thirsts to be deceived. (Emerson 432) In this poem, Emerson dwells on the power of Maya and how it deceives us. In addition to this poem, he talks about Maya several times in his journals. For example, he responds to the idea of Maya in the following entry: The illusion that strikes me [most] as the masterpiece of Maya, is, the timidity with which we assert our moral sentiment. We are made of it, the world is built by it, Things endure as they share it, all beauty, all health, all intelligence exist by it; yet 'tis the last thing we dare utter, we shrink to speak it, or to range ourselves on its side" (Journals XV 243). He fully agrees with the concept of Maya and believes that the whole world is made of it. He quotes from the Veda, a sacred text of the Aryans, that "the world is born of Maya" (Journals XVI 33). However, the concepts of Maya are not always clear-cut. Maya, as it literally means magic, has puzzled many scholars. As seen in the poem "Brahma," Brahma is "the doubter and the doubt." For this, it may seem to be a fruitless endeavor to understand the divine Maya. Likewise, Emerson is sometimes perplexed by the power of Maya. Referring to Indian mythology, he writes, "Brahma said, No, it is not thy true form, that which man sees with his organs made to seize different objects, for thou who art the asylum of knowledge. Of substance, & of quality, thou art distinct from that product of Maya which has no real existence" (Journals XVI 31). It is a dream-like effort to comprehend and embody the mystery of Maya because it has no real existence. For example, we hear Dhruva saying, "Enveloped by the divine Maya, I see distinctions, like a man who dreams. &, in presence of another being, who has meantime no real existence, I suffer from in thinking that this being, who is my brother, is my enemy" (Emerson, Journals XVI 32). The way Maya works seems to be contradictory at times because we have to unite ourselves with Maya, and at the same time, we have to remain distinct from it. As Emerson mentions, "Adore, in order to escape from existence, him who can annihilate it, & whose feet are adorable; he who unites himself, whilst remains distinct from it, to Maya, which is his energy endowed with qualities" (Journals XVI 32). Hence, Emerson is simultaneously inspired and perplexed by the concept of Maya.

In addition to Emerson's journals, we see the presence of Maya in many of his essays. For example, in "Illusions," he claims that we dwell in a kingdom of illusions. With an analogy of sick men in hospital, Emerson describes the condition of human life: "We change only from bed to bed, from one folly to another; it cannot signify much what becomes of such castaways, wailing, stupid, comatose creatures, lifted from bed to bed, from the nothing of life to the nothing of death" (Emerson 384). In his essay "Experience," Emerson writes that we cannot be sure about what we see and perceive of. We see things through filter glass—optical illusions—and we cannot know if what we see is real. If our life is a dream, there is no end to this dream.

Another problem of our experience is our subjectiveness, as we are always trapped in it. The meaning and nature of everything depend on the eyes that see it. Realizing the endlessness of illusion, Emerson concludes that "Nature does not like to be observed, and likes that we should be her fools and playmates" (Emerson 269). He understands how difficult it is to penetrate this illusion as Lord Krishna in the Upanisads says, "This divine maya of Mine, made of the gunas, is difficult to penetrate. But those who take refuge in me alone, they penetrate this illusion" (qtd. in Herman 191). This perplexity pushes Emerson toward the following conclusion: Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion. Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and as we pass through them they prove to be many colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus. From the mountain you see the mountain. We animate what we can, and we see only what we animate. (Emerson 269) Thus, Emerson's writings illustrate that he was heavily influenced by the concept of Maya. The Bhagavad Gita Emerson was particularly struck by the teachings of Bhagavad Gita, "the first of books," as he once called it (Buell 178). He wrote about the Gita that "In England the Understanding rules & materialistic truth, the becoming, the fit, the discreet, the brave, the advantageous But they could not produce such a book as the Bhagavat Geeta" (Journals X, 503). The Gita is an ancient Sanskrit text comprising of verses

embellished with many literary devices such as allegory, metaphor, and allusion. It is a record of conversations between Bhagavan or God, in the form of Krishna, and Arjuna, a human. Arjuna is a ksatriya warrior of the Pandava family and Krishna is his cousin and the driver of his chariot. In the battle field, Arjuna sees many of his relatives in the opposing force and, being overcome by pity, he refuges to fight. Krishna then tries to make him realize the importance of fighting. He also reminds him of his obligation to follow his dharma or duty and to ignore his personal feelings. Krishna sends this message to the mankind through Arjuna, as does Christ through his twelve disciples. Krishna says: "Though unborn, for the Atman [soul] is eternal, though Lord of all beings, yet using my own nature, I come into existence using my own maya." Krishna sends himself through human beings to save people from adharma, ruin of morality and justice. He says, "For whenever there is a decaying of dharma, and a rising up of adharma, then I send Myself forth" (Herman 146). This idea resonates with Emerson's emphasis on intuition and conscience.

In the essay "Over-Soul," he writes that we, as individual souls, are part the Greater or Over-Soul. We do not have to go to church to be united with the Over-Soul because our intuition can illuminate our spiritual world like the flashes of light. Here, Emerson seems to be influenced by the teachings of the Upanisad and the Gita that nirguna [higher] Brahman, or what Emerson calls the Over-Soul, is manifested through human beings. In a letter to William Emerson, written on May 24, 1831, Emerson wrote, "I have been reading 7 or 8 lectures of Cousin—in the first of three vols. of his philosophy. A master of history, an epic he makes of man & of the world—& excels all men in giving effect, yea, éclat to a metaphysical theory. Have you not read it? tis good reading—well worth the time—clients or no clients." (Letters I, 322). Ralph L. Rusk, the editor of Letters, comments that "this reading of Victor Cousin's first volume, Cours de philosophie, 1828, was particularly significant because it was this book which gave Emerson his first taste for the Bhagavadgita" (Letters I, 322). Thus, Emerson's letters along with his essays and journals indicate that the Bhagavad Gita was a great source of knowledge and inspiration for him.

The Laws of Karma another Indian philosophical concept that had tremendous influence on Emerson is karma. In Sanskrit, karma means action or work. In the Upanisadic and Vedic traditions, karma signifies "the results or consequences of action" and, more distinctively, "the unwanted, to-beavoided-at-all-costs results or fruits of action." The results of disobedience bring future suffering and pain. The Vedas, the Upanisads, and the Bhagabad Gita all mention that disobeyers must face grave consequences. The law of karma, in the Brhadaranyaka Upanisad IV.4.6, mentions that "This is what happens to the man who desires. To whatever his mind is attached, the self becomes that in the next life. Achieving that end, it returns again to this world"(qtd. in Herman 131). Thus, the law of karma is a device to link up actions and their consequences of this life and of the next. The Svetasvatara Upanisad states two important doctrines about karma: (1) "According to its actions, the embodied self chooses repeatedly various forms in various conditions in the next life," and (2) "according to its own qualities and acts, the embodied self chooses the kinds of forms, large and small, that it will take on" (qtd. in Herman 131). Therefore, it is the self that chooses the form it wants to be. What is remarkable here is to note that every self gets what it wants and what it deserves. Moreover, the law of karma works automatically because there is no god, according to the abovementioned laws, who can give each self rewards or punishments. Franklin Edgerton comments on this automatic karmic law: "It is man's relation to propriety or morality, dharma, which alone determines. For more than two thousand years, it appears that almost all Hindus have regarded transmigration, determined by "karma," as an axiomatic fact. 'By good deed one becomes what is good; by evil deed, evil'" (qtd. in Herman 132). In this sense, it seems to be clear that the karmic laws work according to the deeds or actions of individuals, not by the choice of any gods. In line with this conception of the karmic laws, Emerson emphasizes the good deeds of people.

In "Self-Reliance," he urges his readers not to depend on good luck. He also believes that we should not take any piece of good fortune as a good omen. He concludes that: A political victory, a rise of rents, the recovery of your sick or the return of your absent friend, or some other favorable event raises your spirits, and you think good days are preparing for you. Do not believe it. Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles (164). Here, Emerson's notion of self-reliance is very close to the karmic laws. We can choose whatever we want to be; everything is determined by our action or karma. We have freedom of choice and we can achieve the godly qualities that we already have within ourselves; or, we can choose to be devilish by our own karma. Nevertheless, Emerson is sometimes disturbed because he sees two sides of things—oftentimes two opposing sides.

In "The Conduct of Life," he presents a virtue of necessity, and believes that it is the art of living to suspend the oppositions and contradictions in mind. Although he recognizes the potent force of Fate, he wants his readers to believe in freewill. If both Fate and freewill are real, we have to conquer both. But, Emerson asks rhetorically: "How shall a man escape from his ancestors?" Nature is responsible in this notion of heredity because Nature, Emerson believes, brings us both disasters and delights. So, how can we accept the delights that Nature brings and avoid the disasters? There is no short answer to this question, as Emerson argues in "Compensation" that "To empty here, you must condense there." However, one answer to this problem seems to be clear when Emerson, in "The Conduct of Life," says that "If we must accept Fate we are not less compelled to affirm liberty." Thus, Emerson's concept of liberty or freewill goes hand in hand with the idea of karma because according to both concepts, we can re/construct our fate by our actions. If Emerson's thinking ever contradicts with Indian thought, it is in his essay "Compensation." He recognizes the moral values of "the Indian mythology [which] ends in the same ethics; and it would seem impossible for any fable to be invented and get any currency which was not moral" (174). However, he is sometimes troubled because he can see not only two sides of things, but also an inherent contradiction in the concepts of good and evil. In "Compensation," he seems to accept the existence of evil when he assures his readers that God has

created everything for the best. Nonetheless, Emerson continues to be perplexed by the riddle of two-sidedness of things. In one of his bleak statements, he writes that "There is a crack in everything God has made" (174). He uses the term "polarity" to describe this unevenness in nature. He goes on to claim that "Polarity, or action and reaction, we meet in every part of nature; in darkness and light; in heat and cold….An inevitable dualism bisects nature, so that each thing is a half" (168).

Earlier, we have noticed Emerson's belief that a union of our individual soul and the Over-Soul is the way of mukti [freedom from this material world and sufferings]. This belief resonates perfectly with the concepts of Brahma and atman, but his observation of dualism in "Compensation" paralyzes his faith. He says that "the same dualism underlies the nature and condition of man….Every sweet hath its sour; every evil its good" (169). Because of this dualism and polarity in nature, the union between the individual soul and the Over-Soul becomes difficult. In short, although much of Emerson's thought and writing corresponds with Indian philosophy and mythology, we see a difference when he thinks that nature is full of dualism, and that this dualism hinders the union between the individual soul and the Over-Soul.

Despite a little bit of contradiction, much of Emerson's belief is aligned with the Indian philosophical and religious thought. Three basic concepts of Brahma, namely, formed and formless Brahma, Atman, and Maya, exerted much influence on Emerson's writings. His essay "The Over-Soul" and poem "Brahma" illustrate the idea of formed and formless Brahma, whereas his "Divinity School Address" deals with the concept of atman—the impersonal god found in every human being. Maya, which denotes a magical power by which the Creator reveals Himself and the mystery of His creation, is probably the most influential Indian concept for Emerson. In his poem "Maia," essays "Illusions" and "Experience," and several journal entries, Emerson talks about Maya. In addition, the Bhagavad Gita, an account of conversations between Krishna and Arjuna, is another great source of knowledge and inspiration for Emerson. Throughout his journals, he praises this book and claims that Europe was not able to produce a book like Gita. Finally, the Indian philosophical concept of karma—work or actions by which peoples' fate is determined—is also dominant in Emerson's writings. The laws of karma emphasize the actions of individuals and freedom of choice. In "The Conduct of Life" and "Self-Reliance," Emerson exploits the concept of karma, and urges his readers to be responsible for their own deeds. Thus, the Indian philosophical and religious concepts and teachings had a great influence on Emerson's intellectual works. By exploring and utilizing Indian spiritual beliefs and philosophical traditions, Emerson paved the way for his successors who continued to dig into the richness of ancient texts such as the Upanisads and the Gita.

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