

**American *Paideia*:  
Public and Private Leadership and the Cultivation of Civic Virtue**

JORDAN BARKALOW

*Bridgewater State University*

Critics of statesmanship in democracy make three arguments. First, scholars claim that the idea of democratic statesmanship is, itself, is a contradiction.<sup>1</sup> Reasoning that there is an inherent tension between popular rule grounded on equality and liberty and the political requirement of decisive action, these scholars hold that elected political officials should simply execute the will of the people. Benjamin Barber makes the most dramatic argument on this front claiming that statesmanship undermines democratic politics.<sup>2</sup> He contends that in an age such as ours, it is possible, safer, more fulfilling, and more just to allow citizens to exercise political judgment. Thus, any need democracy may have had for a statesman has run its course.

Building on this argument, second, democratic theorists contend that statesmanship actually destabilizes democracies as statesmen become a source of factional conflict.<sup>3</sup> The concern here is not just that statesmanship undermines the goal of political stability, but that statesmanship will degenerate into tyranny. Consequently, statesmanship is not a feature of democracy, but an alternative to democracy. Instead of relying on statesmen, all that is needed is effective citizenship which can be achieved by freeing citizens from the restrictions imposed by statesmen.

Finally, scholars argue that statesmanship is no longer possible. As for why this is the case, scholars identify a host of explanations. Gueguen places the blame for America's faltering leadership on the loss of esteem for public office, the growing apathy that characterizes the American people, and the weakening of America's moral foundations.<sup>4</sup> Burns attributes the decline to the lack of a clear standard by which to measure leadership.<sup>5</sup> Storing agrees with Gueguen and Burns that the loss of our intellectual roots explains the loss of statesmanship in America.<sup>6</sup> The problem, according to Storing, is that the political thought of the Founders has been replaced by the reign of popular opinion and the rise of scientific management commonly associated with the political thinking of the Progressives.

Despite these three arguments, some democratic theorists contend that statesmanship and democracy are not inconsistent ideas. Bruce Ackerman provides a vision of statesmanship that emphasizes the promotion of mutual dialogue. The problem with Ackerman's effort is that he effectively reduces the statesman to the political arbiter or political leader.<sup>7</sup> As the next section explains, there is a fundamental difference between statesmanship on the one hand and leadership on the other. Whereas statesmanship emphasizes the cultivation of personal and civic virtues, leaders are merely responsible for reconciling the interests of the public.<sup>8</sup> To the extent

that democratic theory draws on the insights of modern political philosophy and not ancient political thought, democratic theory must look to institutions and figures other than the statesman for the cultivation of the capacities and character traits required for self-government. In particular, democratic theory and democracies must look to the public intellectual who, like the ancient statesman, sees to the development of civic virtue. As argued here, Ralph Waldo Emerson not only argues for the necessity of the public intellectual as statesman, he serves as a model for this figure in a democratic society.

### **Ancients, Moderns and Statesmanship**

Despite their differences, a common aspect of theorizing about statesmanship is that it is grounded in ancient political thought. Cropsey, drawing on Plato's *Statesman*, views statesmanship as connecting political philosophy and politics.<sup>9</sup> The task of the political philosopher is to understand the relation of thought and political life and implement this understanding. Paul Eidelberg develops an Aristotelian model where the statesman coordinates political theory and political practice via constant recourse to the common good.<sup>10</sup> This recourse is not simply a rhetorical device, but a reasoned justification for his course of action which people can understand. This reasoned defense is important because it allows the statesman to gradually modify the intellectual and moral horizons of the people from the private to the public. Based on his reading of Plato's *Gorgias*, Denis Bathory contends that the fundamental job of the statesman is to make the people better.<sup>11</sup> Unlike political leaders who emphasize the diverse needs and wants of men, the statesman's concern is with teaching and training people to look beyond the satisfaction of their apparent and immediate wants.<sup>12</sup>

In drawing on the insights of the ancients, Cropsey, Eidelberg, and Bathory highlight the central role of the statesman in the ancient idea of *paideia*. According to the ancients, *paideia* is an educational process that aims at the cultivation of the ideal citizen/person.<sup>13</sup> The responsibility for this cultivation falls to the statesman. In his *Statesman*, Plato argues that the correct regime is characterized by a certain judging and supervising science which is to say that the correct regime is defined by the presence of statesmanship.<sup>14</sup> Like a doctor, the statesman applies his art to the health of the city.<sup>15</sup> The ability of the statesman to bring health to the city, like a doctor's ability to restore health to the body, depends in large measure on the material they are working with. According to Plato, it is necessary that the statesman begins with the best materials possible.<sup>16</sup> In the ordering of the city, this requires the statesman to concern himself with the moral quality and development of the citizenry. Charged with selecting the teachers who pursue a model of philosophic education devoted to achieving a certain fitting character, the statesman's ability to successfully weave together the tapestry of society depends primarily on his ability to get the right materials which is the result of proper education.

The philosophic quality of this education cannot be overstated, as Jaeger highlights the centrality of philosophy to guide human change.<sup>17</sup> The key to this process is *morphosis*, a term implying that the essential identity of all educational activity is the formation of man.<sup>18</sup> In other words, only philosophy has the ability to change man in the appropriate way. Plato makes this very argument in his *Apology* where he draws a clear distinction between political and philosophic discourse. According to Plato, the former concerns itself with the appearance of justice and the latter with justice itself.<sup>19</sup> In concerning itself with the mere appearance of justice, political discourse appeals to human passions instead of reason. Like the many whose opinion it panders to, political discourse cares for the wrong things. Instead of focusing on truth, wisdom, and the state of the soul, political discourse focuses most on what matters least: wealth, honor, reputation, and political faction.<sup>20</sup>

As the example of Plato shows, the ancient view of statesmanship is essential for the city and individual to reach their full potential. As Reid summarizes, statesmanship

has its roots in personal virtue, which requires intentional cultivation and a study of nature that leads to a realization of the world's unity and interdependence. This realization inspires an appreciation of our communities and a desire to serve them, not through rules and punishment, but by helping others to cultivate their own virtue. This help comes primarily through the expression of noble action of the leader's own virtue, which acts like a magnet to draw the community together and inspire individuals to better themselves.<sup>21</sup>

The statesman is the centerpiece of the constant care that is *paideia* and is fundamentally responsible for the cultivation and development of the citizenry's moral and intellectual virtues.<sup>22</sup> This understanding of the statesman stands in sharp contrast to modern political thought's concern with political leadership. Benjamin Constant identifies a key aspect of modern political thinking that removes the responsibility for the moral development of the citizenry from the sphere of politics—the public/private distinction.<sup>23</sup> For ancients, the highest good is understood in political terms. For moderns, leaders are to take care of the necessary business while leaving space for the rest of us to devote our attention to the private sphere.

In developing the public/private dichotomy, modern political thought no longer requires the presence of morally virtuous rulers and removes the responsibility of moral education and development from the hands of politicians. Machiavelli, for example, famously tells his reader that to emphasize virtue as do the ancients is to guarantee one's political failure.<sup>24</sup> Locke places the responsibility for the moral development of individuals in the hands of the family and makes education largely a private matter.<sup>25</sup> This is not to say that the cultivation of a virtuous citizenry does not matter for modern political thought; it is only to say that they do not rely on statesmen

to do this. As the example of Tocqueville that follows demonstrates, the virtues of citizenship are largely cultivated in the private sphere.

Central to the ability of democracy to remain self-governing and self-sustaining is the development of proper mores.<sup>26</sup> The development of mores, according to Tocqueville, is largely a consequence of the indirect effects of religion as America is “still the place in the world where the Christian religion has more preserved genuine power over souls.”<sup>27</sup> In exercising this power, religion limits the imaginations of citizen and makes the exercise of freedom possible. It limits the imagination in the sense that certain ideas and behaviors are held to be outside of what is morally acceptable. Tocqueville explains that “while the law permits the American people to do everything, religion prevents them from conceiving everything and forbids them to dare everything.”<sup>28</sup> Religion’s ability to restrict and limit is of crucial importance in a country that places so much emphasis on the accumulation of wealth. On this point, Tocqueville writes:

The principle business of religion is to purify, regulate, and restrain the too ardent taste for well-being that men in times of equality feel; but I believe they would be wrong to try to subdue it entirely and to destroy it. They will not succeed in turning man away from the love of wealth; but they can still persuade them to enrich themselves only by honest means.<sup>29</sup>

To achieve these desired effects, religious beliefs should be dogmatic.<sup>30</sup> The dogmatic quality of these beliefs is necessary so as to “shield” ideas about God, the human soul, and our duties toward God from “the habitual action of individual reason.”<sup>31</sup> Given the Cartesian quality of the American mind, to subject religious beliefs to this extreme skepticism undermines religion’s ability to positively shape mores.

In highlighting the importance of religion for the cultivation of proper mores, Tocqueville speaks directly to the primacy of the private sphere and, in particular, the role of the American clergy in performing one of the key functions of the ancient statesman—the cultivation of an enlightened and virtuous citizenry.<sup>32</sup> According to Tocqueville, religion enjoys a “peaceful dominion” in America principally because of the “complete separation of church and state.”<sup>33</sup> The clergy not only do not hold public office, but go out of their way to “distance themselves from power” and take “a sort of professional pride in remaining strangers to it.”<sup>34</sup> The clergy recognizes that religion must remain within its “proper bounds” and “not seek to leave them” as doing so raises the possibility of religion “no longer being believed in any matter.”<sup>35</sup>

As the contrast between ancients and moderns makes clear, one should not expect modern, liberal thought to be able to provide the moral education sought by the ancients. In large measure this is because liberalism leaves open the question of the highest human good. Ancient political thinking recognizes the centrality of this question as an understanding of the good is necessary if

one is to develop a model of education that facilitates living a morally serious life. Even to the extent that liberal discourse does offer a thinner morality, its reliance on skepticism calls into question its own principles of justice and morality. Moreover, as long as liberalism continues to assert the separation between the public world of the citizen and the private world of the individual, it denies the educative function of the state and the laws. The lack of statesmanship that characterizes modern political thought requires one to look elsewhere for the model of *paideia* that makes democratic governance possible. Given the public/private distinction, one must look to the private sphere for statesmen. As demonstrated in the next section, Ralph Waldo Emerson recognizes the need for a statesmanlike figure to engage in the moral education of a democratic people and his writings and life are fruitfully interpreted in light of this goal.

### **Emerson and the American *Paideia***

Critics of Emerson question the philosophic quality of his essays. They complain that Emerson's argument(s) lack coherence as they illuminate in multiple directions without ever actually settling an issue. Stephen Whicher argues that Emerson is too general, vague, and obvious to provide a comprehensive ethical theory.<sup>36</sup> Joel Porte contends that Emerson's ethical teaching suffers from an inconsistency as he is a radical in some areas (religion, society and literature) and conservative in the area of ethics.<sup>37</sup> Given these limitations, some scholars go so far as to suggest that Emerson is too concerned with power to speak to ethical questions. Instead, Emerson is thought to evade more difficult philosophical questions in favor of more pragmatic solutions to the problems of the day.<sup>38</sup>

Despite these arguments, the general scholarly consensus is that philosophy and ethics are so central to Emerson's intellectual enterprise that Judith Shklar refers to Emerson as "*the American philosopher*."<sup>39</sup> As Richardson shows, Emerson's life and work represents a continued effort to refute the skepticism of David Hume.<sup>40</sup> In doing so, Emerson takes up the key question of ethical thinking: How shall I live?<sup>41</sup> Like the philosophic minds he was so interested in, Emerson's primary concern is with how ethics shapes individual thought and action.<sup>42</sup> This explains, to a considerable degree, Emerson's fundamental concern with education and his critique of public education.<sup>43</sup> According to Shklar, Emerson:

thought the official reason for public education cynical. It was argued that with universal suffrage, even the lower classes needed education to turn them into reasonable, property-loving voters. The character and needs and hopes and possibilities of individual children were of no concern. Those attributes would not help their development or power of self-education or help them to become self-

reliant individuals with minds of their own. To Emerson an education that did not attempt more than to constrain was no education at all; it was betrayal.<sup>44</sup>

As the criticism shows, Emerson is concerned with more than the effects of education. He is concerned with developing the moral quality of the American citizenry which is done by providing the incentive for thinking philosophically.<sup>45</sup> Proof is this is provided by Emerson's support of Amos Bronson Alcott's Temple School. Established in 1834, the Temple School introduced an entirely new plan of education. Based on the Transcendental view of education that stressed active intelligence over passive absorption, Alcott recommended a method of close questioning of a gentle and persistent sort that closely resembled the Socratic method. The objective of the method was to instill self-trust in the students by focusing on their moral development.<sup>46</sup> Alcott's position on public education thus mirrors the criticism of higher education provided by Emerson in "American-Scholar." Both fear the emphasis on conformity that constrains the philosophic discourse necessary for the development of whole individuals capable of thinking and acting for themselves.<sup>47</sup>

Given Emerson's emphasis on philosophic thinking and education, it remains to be determined what Emerson's understanding of philosophic education is and why it is necessary. Moreover, it is necessary to determine what the goal of this model of education is. The next section identifies Emerson's diagnosis for what is wrong with the individual and American society. The section that follows lays out Emerson's educational remedy for these problems and the final section responds to a criticism for the argument advanced here from within Emerson's own writings.

### **Emerson's Diagnosis of the Ills of American Democracy and Society**

From his publication of "Nature" in 1836 to the publication of a selection of his favorite poems in 1874, one of Emerson's fundamental concerns is with the state of the human soul. As Emerson writes, "I only wish to indicate the true position of nature in regard to man, wherein to establish man, all right education tends; as the ground which to attain is the object of human life, that is, a man's connection to nature."<sup>48</sup> Only by properly understanding man's relation to nature (a term Emerson uses interchangeably between its philosophic and aesthetic senses) and building a system of education on this understanding does it become possible for man to know what it means to be human and, consequently, how man should live. The problem, as Emerson sees it, is that man is divorced from nature and, consequently, alienated from himself.<sup>49</sup> Emerson portrays alienated man as the opposite of the child who is described as being whole.<sup>50</sup> Children are whole in the sense that their inward and outward senses remain truly adjusted to one another.<sup>51</sup> This allows the child to be "independent" whereas the divided adult is "clapped into jail" by his or her

consciousness.<sup>52</sup> By consciousness, Emerson does not refer to the internal mechanism that regulates human behavior. Emerson refers to the internal mechanism that regulates human behavior as the moral sense which has been rendered weak and unable to perform this function because of man's divorce from nature. Consciousness, as used here, refers to the external considerations of others as the limits on human behavior and thought instead of one's own character.<sup>53</sup> Where the child is independent, man is a conformist.

Man's almost exclusive focus on external matters renders him broken. Emerson describes man as lacking "unity, and lies broken in heaps" because "man is disunited with himself."<sup>54</sup> Man is now "timid and apologetic" because he no longer has self-trust.<sup>55</sup> The breakdown of man into "a thing" allows each of us to be defined by the social function we play instead of being and end worthy of moral consideration. Thus, Emerson's scholar degenerates into "mere thinker" instead of "Man thinking."<sup>56</sup> The problem here is that the act of thinking is divorced from the understanding of what it means to be human. We no longer turn our thoughts inward in consideration of the soul. Our exclusive focus lies with the external world.

The question to emerge naturally here is why this is the case? Emerson answers this question by pointing to certain aspects of society/culture. First, Emerson is critical of the emphasis placed on tradition.<sup>57</sup> For Emerson, the argument in favor of tradition is problematic in that it denies subsequent generations the opportunity to have an original relationship with nature which only adds to the division of man. Emerson opens "Nature" by asking the following: "Why should not we enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should we not have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not by the history of theirs?"<sup>58</sup> In asking for a revelation of our own, Emerson points his reader to the argument he will make against historical Christianity in his "Divinity School Address." The first defect of historical Christianity, according to Emerson, is that it fails to provide a doctrine of the soul.<sup>59</sup> Instead of emphasizing religion's relationship to the human soul, historical Christianity places too much emphasis on the person of Jesus. Focusing on the person of Jesus suggests that what truly matters for religion is getting the facts about the life and times of Jesus correct instead the inspirational quality of his message. This means, second, that religion as practiced in Emerson's New England and taught at the Harvard Divinity School fails to explore man's moral nature.<sup>60</sup> Cumulatively, the two problems with historical Christianity have the effect of treating Jesus as if he were dead instead of showing how the message of Jesus teaches us "the duties of life" and "converts life into truth."<sup>61</sup>

To counter the "absence of faith" historical Christianity engenders due to historicism's "coldness," religion must return its focus to the individual soul.<sup>62</sup> At a practical level, this requires every individual to pursue an inherently private and personal relationship with the divine.<sup>63</sup> At an intellectual level, this requires the scholar to confront the skepticism that informs historicism and to offer an alternative. The problem with historicism's extreme skepticism is that

it denies the student the ability to “manly” contemplate “the whole.”<sup>64</sup> Instead, the emphasis on empiricism clouds “the sight of man with the very knowledge of functions and processes” it provides.<sup>65</sup> The emphasis on parsimony unnecessarily and dangerously reduces the whole of nature to the simplest explanations. Emerson’s problem with skepticism on this front is that it fails to provide a theory of creation. To arrive at a theory of creation, it is necessary to have recourse to areas of thought other than history and science. One needs to look at areas that emphasize creativity—poetry and philosophy.<sup>66</sup> Emerson says we should accept the truth that “poetry comes nearer to vital truth than history.”<sup>67</sup> The poet and philosopher’s concern with creativity, or putting thought into action, serves as Emerson’s great response to skepticism. He wants man to think for himself and then to trust his own thought when acting.

That Emerson desires this is seen in his critique of the reform movements of his day. Modern reform, according to Emerson, has a large horizon. It is no longer enough for these movements to reform our daily employments, our households, and institutions of property. What is needed is a total revision of our social structure, state, school, religion, views on marriage, trade, science, and understanding of our own nature.<sup>68</sup> While Emerson commends these reformers for their desire to improve the condition of man, he is critical of the nature of their reform as they miss the proper object of genuine reform—the individual soul.<sup>69</sup> Emerson rejects the proposition that you can improve man by simply improving his circumstances. Modern reform movements see reform in purely political or instrumental terms. For them, reform is a consequence of bringing together a critical mass of men.<sup>70</sup> Emerson views this in starkly different terms, arguing that what they truly rely on is fear, wrath, and the spirit of party.<sup>71</sup> The reformer’s emphasis on power is a response to the fact that the private domain is completely off limits. Reform must focus on those things that lie outside of the private sphere. The problem is that there can be no genuine social reform for Emerson if individuals are not first reformed themselves. It is the job of reformer, like the ancient statesman, to facilitate the self-cultivation of proper character traits which leads this discussion to Emerson’s remedy for the ills he finds in America.

### **Emerson’s Educational Remedy**

That Emerson recommends education, or *paideia*, as the solution to the aforementioned problems should not be that surprising. He was a leading figure in the Lyceum movement which was originally intended to expand the knowledge of young men already employed in mills and other industrial enterprises. While originally to emphasize scientific knowledge, the Lyceum quickly extended its range of topics to include history, theology, philosophy and politics.<sup>72</sup> Delivering a series of lectures in the evening, after the end of the work day, the Lyceum speeches sought to improve the education of Americans.



According to Emerson, the primary task of education is to redeem the soul of man.<sup>73</sup> By restoring the world's original and eternal beauty through the study of nature, man will see and come to believe in the correct understanding of virtue.<sup>74</sup> The common view of virtue is that it is not common and that you can distinguish between man and virtue.<sup>75</sup> For Emerson, this consequence of skepticism contributes to the breakdown of man. It becomes possible to combat this when one recognizes that "what we do not call education is more precious than what we call education."<sup>76</sup> For Emerson, an education in nature has the effect of reconnecting man and virtue.<sup>77</sup> In the recognition that virtue is a sentiment within all of us, man is able to renounce himself to virtue and in doing so he "comes to himself" and the unity of man is restored.<sup>78</sup>

This moral education is to be provided through things like the Lyceum movement and through popular writing. Emerson's concern with the act of writing and its moral consequences places him in the company of Montaigne, Bacon, and Hume. As Ryan Patrick Hanley demonstrates in his analysis of Hume's *My Own Life*, the essayist brings his wisdom directly to a popular audience in a format and language that is more easily accessed and, consequently, has the effect of improving the moral quality of the people.<sup>79</sup> Employing the imagery of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," Emerson's scholar is to "cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances."<sup>80</sup> Finding consolation in the exercise of the highest functions of human nature, the scholar "breathes and lives on public and illustrious thoughts."<sup>81</sup> In doing so, the goal of the scholar is to alter one's "state of mind" by persuading man to open himself to the internal life of the moral sense.<sup>82</sup> This is no easy task as there is something in the nature of man that inclines him to conform and a general resistance to those who, like the scholar, set no value on tradition, but emphasize what one thinks.<sup>83</sup>

Emerson's scholar, like Socrates, will be resisted and must consequently demonstrate courage. "Manlike," the scholar must resist conforming to conventional wisdom in his effort to "inspect its [nature's] origins."<sup>84</sup> Here, the scholar communes with "the most important influence on his mind and he must, for himself, settle the question of what constitutes the value of nature in his own life."<sup>85</sup> Consideration of this question distinguishes, for Emerson, his thought from the skepticism he associates with Hume, natural science and history. In particularly poetic language, Emerson writes that man and nature "proceed from one root; one is leaf and one is flower; relation, sympathy, stirring in every vein. And what is that root? Is not the soul of his soul?—A thought too bold,—a dream too wild."<sup>86</sup> Where Hume's natural philosophy, in recognition of the limits of the philosophic enterprise, stops at a description of how nature functions, Emerson calls for the scholar and any man thinking to reform the soul. For Emerson, the insights of natural philosophy are merely "first gropings" in an effort to "know thyself" by studying nature.<sup>87</sup>

When man, inspired and cajoled by the scholar, comes to an understanding of himself he discovers that he is not only inseparable from virtue, but that he must trust that virtue. In Chapter Six of *The Conduct of Life*, entitled "Worship," Emerson argues that the moral sense has the

power to counterweight the skepticism that results from leaning too heavily on fate, practical power, and trade.<sup>88</sup> Here, Emerson does not argue that we should not be skeptical. He argues that we should give skepticism “as much line as we can” but not so much line that it “breaks down the natural belief” in morality that “we are all born with.”<sup>89</sup> The moral sense has the effect of returning man to completeness. No longer distrustful of human virtue, the presence of an active moral sense distinguishes the shallow man from the strong man. Where the former believes in luck and explains everything as a consequence of circumstance, the latter denies Hume’s conclusion that cause and effect cannot be proven and boldly asserts not only its existence, but its truth.<sup>90</sup> The key to this is for the people to recognize that “the moral sense re-appears day-to-day with the same morning newness that has from of the fountain of beauty and strength.”<sup>91</sup>

When man recognizes that obedience to our inner moral perceptions (self-trust) is the remedy for the skepticism that divides man against himself, the scholar has fulfilled his highest purpose. The scholar’s continued presence is needed because skepticism is an essential feature of the human condition. Filling the void created in modern political thought where the ancient statesman once stood, Emerson and his scholar are charged with seeing to the moral health of the nation which can only be accomplished by performing the duties of the scholar.<sup>92</sup> As Shklar reminds us, education as reform is a two-way street where the scholar continues his own process of self-reform by learning from those he teaches.<sup>93</sup> Through public oration and writing, the scholar makes interpretation possible and in this he serves as a representative man. As a private figure, the scholar facilitates the ability of the observer to identify with the observed. He is not one of Carlyle’s heroes. The scholar is one of us. He employs the same language we do and in his example he embodies the aspiration that is man thinking. The scholar aids us is the re-discovery of our soul and the ethical codes that reside there.<sup>94</sup> Emerson, like Plato’s statesman, recognizes that the great aim of philosophy and education is the soul.<sup>95</sup> Only when the soul is properly educated is liberation possible and, at a political level, is genuine self-governance possible.<sup>96</sup>

### **Emersonian Prospects**

The vision of the self-reliant scholar as democratic statesman just laid out is not without its problems. In particular, one has to address the question of whether or not Emerson himself retreats from the celebration of intellectual power and freedom in “Self-Reliance” only to adopt a less optimistic perspective in his later writings? The traditional interpretation of Emerson is that he does backtrack from the position he takes in “Self-Reliance.”<sup>97</sup> If this is the case, then Emerson himself would reject the argument made above. To determine whether or not this is the case, this section takes up the relationship between “Self-Reliance” and the text said to contain

Emerson's clearest rebuttal of his earlier position, the first chapter of *The Conduct of Life*, "Fate."

Recall that "Self-Reliance" is Emerson's clarion call for the individual to throw off convention and to think for himself. Emerson writes that you should "abide by your spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility when the whole cry of voices is on the other side."<sup>98</sup> The self-reliant person is only concerned with what he must do and "not what people think."<sup>99</sup> Only by discarding the pretensions and propositions of society can man become true to nature's intention and while Emerson's tone is generally optimistic, the occasional element of doubt can be detected. For example, in the midst of his argument for individualism as the solution to the ills of society, Emerson admits to being "ashamed" by how "easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions."<sup>100</sup> That Emerson's optimism is somewhat balanced or checked in "Self-Reliance" is important. To read Emerson's argument as calling for a radical form of individualism is to misread Emerson. As Dolan, Sacks, and Kateb recognize, self-reliant activity and thought is not divorced from moral standards.<sup>101</sup> Instead, self-reliance is framed by moral limits provided by the moral sense. That this is the case is evident when one looks at Emerson's argument in "Fate."

Emerson begins "Fate" by raising the fundamental question of ethics: How shall I live?<sup>102</sup> In order to understand this more fundamental question and answer it, Emerson indicates that one must first come to terms with a "polarity" that describes the human condition. This polarity is the tension between fate on the one hand and freedom/power on the other.<sup>103</sup> In taking up fate, Emerson is concerned with the idea of fate as something that tyrannizes the character of man.<sup>104</sup> Knowing that the primary effect of this tyranny is the division of man, Emerson must identify the things that actively tyrannize. Emerson refers to these things as fate which he defines as anything that limits the individual.<sup>105</sup> Of interest here is the imagery Emerson employs. Describing fate as a hoop that surrounds the individual, Emerson provides his reader with a visual image that is quite similar to his understanding of self-reliant activity being limited or surrounded by the moral sense. This suggests that fate is like the moral sense in that it limits or restricts self-reliant activity. To the extent that this is correct, one is left to consider the question of how fate differs from the moral sense.

According to Emerson, accepting fate compels one to affirm liberty.<sup>106</sup> In affirming liberty one also affirms the following: the significance of the individual, the grandeur of duty, and the power of character. What is of interest here is the fact that Emerson locates character on the side of freedom suggesting that it limits self-reliance in a fundamentally different way than fate does. When Emerson takes up the direct relationship between fate and man, he is careful to couch the relationship in terms of fate and thought. He says that "Intellect annuls Fate. So far as man thinks he is free."<sup>107</sup> Emerson's careful presentation of the relationship suggests that the great danger posed by fate is on the ability of man to think. This is not to say that as long as man thinks he has

vanquished fate from his life. Emerson knows better than to make this argument because he recognizes that nature, through fate, will always be able to present to man things that have yet to be passed under the fire of thought.<sup>108</sup> What distinguishes fate from the moral sense is that the latter has passed under the fire of thought. Thus, the limitations or restrictions imposed by the moral sense are not only understood by man, but placed there as a consequence of his own reflection. Thus, at the end of the day all one can hope to accomplish is to harmonize freedom and fate which is accomplished through the presence of the moral sentiment.

If all that can be done to fate and freedom is harmonize them, then both the pessimistic and optimistic readings of the relationship between “Self-Reliance” and “Fate” fail to consider the possibility that Emerson stakes out a middle position. Pessimists read passages like the following as evidence of Emerson conceding the argument that self-reliance will win the day. He writes, “The forces which we resist these torrents of tendency looks so ridiculously inadequate, that it amounts to little more than a criticism or a protest made by a minority of one, under compulsion of millions.”<sup>109</sup> The self-reliant individual is doomed to fail in his quixotic enterprise as society will perpetually remain “servile from want of will.”<sup>110</sup> The problem with this reading is the overall balance with which Emerson treats the subject. In the midst of his extended pessimistic treatment of fate, Emerson slips in a bit of optimism. He says that fate, when properly used, has the effect of lifting our conduct to the loftiness of nature.<sup>111</sup> Thus, fate brings man back to his proper subject of study (nature) and to the place where he can recover the completeness of his being. All man has to do is recognize this and act accordingly.

The same problem characterizes the optimistic reading. Richardson, for example, reads “Fate” as a bold affirmation of the freedom found in “Self-Reliance.”<sup>112</sup> The optimistic argument places great emphasis on the idea that fate “has its lord” in freedom.<sup>113</sup> As its lord, freedom of thinking “takes man out of servitude into freedom” as man is now able to “speak from insight” and capable of affirming “of himself what is true of the mind.”<sup>114</sup> The problem encountered here is that Emerson never argues that freedom annuls fate. He only argues that “If Fate follows and limits power, power attends and antagonizes Fate.”<sup>115</sup> In concluding that freedom and fate must always coexist, Emerson concludes that harmony is the best that can be hoped for in this life.<sup>116</sup> Instead of being evidence of backtracking as the pessimists contend, this is a consistent position for Emerson and one that makes sense when one considers, in more detail, the place of ethics in his understanding of the relationship between freedom and fate.

According to Emerson, thinking is not the only path to freedom as the moral sentiment also makes us free.<sup>117</sup> This is not to say that there are two distinct pathways to freedom, but to say that freedom and the moral sentiment must combine if man is to bring harmony to his life. They must be combined because the perception of truth through the freedom of thought is not, by itself, adequate. It must be combined with the moral sense to instill in one the desire to see that the truth “shall prevail.”<sup>118</sup> From this one sees that what ultimately makes self-trust possible is

the blending of intellect and the moral sense. The moral sense confirms the goodness of the insight and, as Emerson writes, “insight is not will, nor is affection will. Perception is cold, and goodness dies in wishes.”<sup>119</sup> When fused together, thought and the moral sense create the will and when the energy of the will is created man is able to recognize the right way to go. Seeing it, he “moves on that aim” with the world under him for “root and support.”<sup>120</sup> Emerson is clear that one must be certain that this is the right way to go suggesting that one has not only thought about all of the possible options, but that the best option has received the blessing of the moral sentiment. Once again, Emerson limits freedom through self-authorship and it is ultimately the knowledge that this limitation is the right thing to do that instills in man the courage, resolve, and fortitude to combat fate and bring balance to one’s life. In reconciling “Self-Reliance” and “Fate” in this way, Emerson agrees with Plato that the scholar as statesman plays a central role in harmonizing the human soul and, by extension, society. Without this Emerson like figure, harmony and happiness are fleeting or what passes for happiness is, upon closer inspection, really a source of misery.

## Conclusion

America’s reliance on modern political thought renders the status of the ancient statesman in American democracy problematic. Charged with the moral development of the people, the ancient statesman takes advantage of there being no distinction between public and private in pursuit of the good. In its demotion of the statesman to mere political leader, modern political thinking transfers the responsibility of the moral development of the citizenry to the private sphere. As argued above, many of the responsibilities of the statesman fall to the public intellectual. Here, Ralph Waldo Emerson serves as a representative model of the scholar/statesman who is responsible for the character development of the American people. Through public gatherings like the Lyceum movement and the publication of essays, Emerson both embodies the responsibilities of the scholar/statesman and plays a critical role in democratic society by continually striving to check the forces that divide and weaken man.

When considering Emerson in his role as scholar/statesman, it is worth considering the question of whether or not Emerson was successful in his efforts. One would have to answer that he was successful and that evidence in support of this conclusion is provided on two fronts. From a literary perspective, Emerson strongly influenced the likes of Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman. In terms of his social influence, Emerson had transformed himself from a writer with only regional appeal into a recognized figure on the literary landscape both nationally and internationally.<sup>121</sup> Emerson makes this transition during the 1840s as a result of his public lectures, the publication of two volumes of his essays, *The Dial*, and his 1847 volume of poems.<sup>122</sup> So powerful was Emerson’s reputation that when asked to speak to Howard

University's law students at the last minute, Emerson's improvised talk on what books one ought to read caused bookstores in Boston to sell out of the titles mentioned by Emerson.<sup>123</sup>

As important as Emerson was in his day, our own time seems to cry out for a scholar/statesman as the skepticism Emerson fought so hard to combat seems to have degenerated into cynicism. Simply reflecting on recent polling data on the level of public disapproval of Congress suggests that the best understanding of America's evaluation of Congress is cynical. Summarizing polling data from Gallup, FOX News, CBS News, ABC News/*Washington Post*, and NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*, Real Clear Politics shows that, on average, only 14.8% of American approve of the job Congress is doing while 76.8% disapprove.<sup>124</sup> Couple these with the political reality of polarization and continual campaigning and we have a recipe for why we should not look to contemporary political leaders to act and serve as statesmen.

To the extent that this is true, we have even greater need for someone in the mold of Emerson today. The problem is that the public intellectual appears to be an endangered species. While an argument can be made that changes in American culture explain this decline, Russell Jacoby argues that a better explanation for this decline is the movement from the intellectual into the academy.<sup>125</sup> This move is important as an educated, literate public is replaced by professional colleagues as the intellectual's primary audience. As academics, we write monographs for specialized journals that require us to situate our thoughts within the context of our field and discipline. We do this because our jobs, advancement, and salaries depend on the evaluation of other specialists. This dependence, consequently, affects the questions we ask, the issues we broach, and the language we employ. By shifting our intellectual activity and talents from the public arena to the insular world of the academy we run the risk of failing to transmit our [political] culture.<sup>126</sup>

All of this raises the following question: Has the academy turned its back on its social responsibility? Bruce Kuklick's study of Harvard's Department of Philosophy concludes that this is, in fact, the case.<sup>127</sup> A similar conclusion may be drawn about political science and economics. Both disciplines, emphasizing complex statistical models that facilitate publication, suffer from a paucity of relevance.<sup>128</sup> Do we, as scholars, have public responsibilities akin to those of the scholar/statesman? If so, how can we balance these with our professional responsibilities? Can this even be done? These are the questions I am left with at the conclusion of this study. Even in death, Emerson continues to inspire this reader, at least, to consider his place in the nature of things.

## Endnotes

1. See Gueguen 1982, 473–74; Danhauser 1980, 119. For a more general overview see Ruderman 1997, 761–62.
2. Barber 1988, 117; 1984, 24, 235–37.
3. See Ruderman 1997, 761–62 and Lawler 1987, 713–14. For an argument in opposition to Lawler see Weaver 1997, 420–446.
4. Gueguen 1982, 470.
5. Burns 1978, 1–5, 25–27.
6. Storing 1980, 88–91, 105, 111.
7. Ackerman 1981, 6–7, 13, 19, 269.
8. Weaver 1997, 428–429.
9. Cropsey 1975.
10. Eidelberg 1974.
11. Bathory 1978, 3–6.
12. On the emphasis leadership places as reconciling these needs and wants see Burns 1978, 4–5, 19.
13. Jaeger 1965, 62, 87.
14. Plato 2000, 292B–C; see also 250B, 260B–C; and 261B–C. Throughout, I follow the standard method of citing Platonic dialogues by Stephanus number(s).
15. *Ibid.*, 293B.
16. *Ibid.*, 308C.
17. Jaeger 1965, 41.
18. *Ibid.*, 87.
19. Plato 1984, 17D.
20. *Ibid.*, 29D, 30A; also see 28C and 36B.
21. Reid 2010, 55.

22. See Jaeger 1965, 87.
23. See Parrish 2010, 76.
24. See Machiavelli 1980, 94. For a fuller discussion of Machiavelli's break with ancient philosophy, start with Strauss 1978, 54–84.
25. See Locke 1989, 80.
26. Tocqueville 2000, 275. Tocqueville shares common ground with the democratic theorists discussed above who essentially argue that democratic citizenship is achieved through democratic practice. This area of common ground is best exemplified by Tocqueville's analysis of township governments in America. Tocqueville differs from these arguments in his contention that something more than democracy is needed. On townships and their effects see 57–65 and 485–489.
27. *Ibid.*, 278.
28. *Ibid.*, 279.
29. *Ibid.*, 422; also see 419.
30. *Ibid.*, 417.
31. *Ibid.*, 418.
32. Tocqueville also points to the centrality of the family on this front and, in particular, the critical role played by women. He argues that religion “reigns as a sovereign over the soul of woman, and it is woman who makes mores.” To the extent that women play a fundamental role in the development of the mores that enable and sustain democracies, the locus of this responsibility is even more private as women, according to Tocqueville, remain exclusively in the private sphere. See *Ibid.*, 279, 573–77.
33. *Ibid.*, 283.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*, 419.
36. Whicher 1971, 44.
37. Porte 1966, 68.



38. The pragmatic Emerson is best seen in Robinson 2009, 182; Poirier 1988; West 1989; and Jacobson 1993.
39. Shklar 1998, 101.
40. Richardson 1995, 29–32.
41. Von Crompton 2003, 1. See also Richardson 1995, 16.
42. Buell 2003, 211.
43. Here, I address Emerson's concerns with education (generally) and below I discuss Emerson's position on historical Christianity. Education and religion are two mechanisms through which virtue is cultivated in the individual. As already mentioned in the discussion of Tocqueville above, the family is another institution that has historically played an important role in this process. I do not address Emerson's position on the family here as there is not adequate evidence to distill Emerson's position on the family and its role, if it has one, in the cultivation of virtue.
44. Shklar 1998, 75–76.
45. Cavell 2003, 150.
46. Richardson 1995, 294; Bickman 1994, 389; and Sacks 2003, 110.
47. Sacks 2003, 123.
48. Emerson 1983, 38.
49. *Ibid.*, 10.
50. *Ibid.*, 260.
51. *Ibid.*, 10.
52. *Ibid.*, 261.
53. *Ibid.*, 261.
54. *Ibid.*, 47.
55. *Ibid.*, 270.
56. *Ibid.*, 54. On the active and lively scholarly debate over Emerson's preferred understanding of self-reliance and how this understanding informs his vision of the

American Scholar, see Kateb 2002, 4, 17, 25, 61–62; Buell 2003, 243; Richardson 1995, 371; and Cavell 2003, 55.

57. *Ibid.*, 7.

58. *Ibid.*

59. *Ibid.*, 80–81.

60. *Ibid.*, 82–83.

61. *Ibid.*, 83–84, 85.

62. *Ibid.*, 78, 88.

63. *Ibid.*, 88–89.

64. *Ibid.*, 7.

65. *Ibid.*

66. *Ibid.*, 34–36.

67. *Ibid.*, 45.

68. *Ibid.*, 145–46.

69. *Ibid.*, 597, 599.

70. *Ibid.*, 162.

71. *Ibid.*

72. Jacoby 2008, 56.

73. Emerson 1983, 47.

74. *Ibid.*, 306.

75. *Ibid.*, 74.

76. *Ibid.*, 306.

77. See *Ibid.*, 395.

78. *Ibid.*, 76–77.

79. Hanley 2002, 61.
80. Emerson 1983, 63.
81. *Ibid.*
82. *Ibid.*, 65.
83. *Ibid.*, 264, 259.
84. *Ibid.*, 65.
85. *Ibid.*, 54.
86. *Ibid.*, 55.
87. *Ibid.*, 56.
88. *Ibid.*, 1055.
89. *Ibid.*, 1055–56.
90. Emerson 1983, 1065.
91. *Ibid.*, 1061.
92. *Ibid.*, 316.
93. Shklar 1998, 77.
94. Emerson 1983, 617.
95. *Ibid.*, 638.
96. *Ibid.*, 639. Throughout this section I employed “scholar” as it is the term used by Emerson. The argument made in this section shows, I hope, that this term can be used interchangeably with “statesman.”
97. See Buell 2003, 282–283 and Richardson 1995, 501–502.
98. Emerson 1983, 259.
99. *Ibid.*, 263.
100. *Ibid.*, 262.
101. See Dolan 2009, 15; Sacks 2003, 51; and Kateb 2002, 136.

102. Emerson 1983, 943.
103. *Ibid.*, 946.
104. *Ibid.*, 946.
105. *Ibid.*, 952.
106. *Ibid.*, 943.
107. *Ibid.*, 953.
108. *Ibid.*, 958.
109. *Ibid.*, 951.
110. *Ibid.*, 957.
111. *Ibid.*, 954.
112. Richardson 1995, 500. For a more extreme reading of the place of freedom in “Fate” see Cavell 2003, 197, 208, 212.
113. Emerson 1983, 953.
114. *Ibid.*, 954–955.
115. *Ibid.*, 953.
116. Hansen 2008, 422–423, 433.
117. Emerson 1983, 956.
118. *Ibid.*
119. *Ibid.*, 957.
120. *Ibid.*
121. Richardson 1995, 522.
122. *The Dial* was a Transcendentalist magazine. On Emerson’s time as editor of *The Dial* see *Ibid.*, 376–380.
123. *Ibid.*, 524–525.

124. “Congressional Job Approval.” [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/congressional\\_job\\_approval-903.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/congressional_job_approval-903.html)
125. Jacoby 1987, 6.
126. *Ibid.*, 7.
127. See Kuklick 1977.
128. See Ricci 1987; Seidelman and Harpham 1985; and McClosky 1998.

## Works Cited

- Ackerman, Bruce. 1981. *Social Justice in the Liberal State*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Barber, Benjamin. 1988. *The Conquest of Politics: Liberal Philosophy in Democratic Times*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1984. *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bathory, Peter D. 1978. “Political Leadership” A Common Search for the Possible.” In *Leadership in America: Consensus, Corruption, and Charisma*. New York: Longman, Chapters 3–10.
- Bickman, Martin. 1994. “From Emerson to Dewey: The Fate of Freedom in American Education.” *American Literary History* 6.3: 385–408.
- Buell, Lawrence. 2003. *Emerson*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Burns, James McGregor. 1978. *Leadership*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Cavell, Stanley. 2003. *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- “Congressional Job Approval.” Real Clear Politics. [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/congressional\\_job\\_approval-903.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/congressional_job_approval-903.html)
- Cropsey, Joseph. 1975. “The United States as Regime.” In *The Moral Foundations of the American Republic*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 165–180.

- Danhauser, Werner J. 1980. "Reflections on Statesmanship and Bureaucracy." In *Bureaucrats, Policy Analysts, Statesmen: Who Leads?* Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 114–132.
- Dolan, Neal. 2009. *Emerson's Liberalism*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Eidelberg, Paul. 1974. *A Discourse on Statesmanship: The Design and Transformation of the American Polity*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. 1983. *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*. Edited by Joel Porte. New York: The Library of America.
- Gueguen, John A. 1982. "Reflections on the Presidency." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 12.4: 470–484.
- Hanley, Ryan Patrick. 2002. "Hume's Last Lesson: The Civic Education of 'My Own Life.'" *The Review of Politics* 64.4: 659–685.
- Hansen, Andrew C. 2008. "Reading Sonic Culture in Emerson's 'Self-Reliance.'" *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 11.3: 417–437.
- Jacobson, David. 1993. *Emerson's Pragmatic Vision: The Dance of the Eye*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Jacoby, Russell. 1987. *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Jacoby, Susan. 2008. *The Age of American Unreason*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Jaeger, Werner. 1965. *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Kateb, George. 2002. *Emerson and Self-Reliance*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kuklick, Bruce. 1977. *The Rise of American Philosophy: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1860–1930*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Lawler, Peter A. 1987. "'The Federalist's' Hostility to Leadership and the Crisis of the Contemporary Presidency." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 17.4: 711–723.
- Locke, John. 1989. *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. Edited by John W. Yolton and Jean S. Yolton. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Machiavelli, Niccolò. 1980. *The Prince*. Translated by Leo S. Paul de Alvarez. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.
- McClosky, Deidre M. 1998. *The Rhetoric of Economics*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Parrish, John M. 2010. "Philosophical Foundations of Political Leadership." In *Political and Civic Leadership: A Reference Handbook*. Los Angeles: Sage, 69–87.
- Plato. 2000. *Statesman*. Translated by Eva Brann, Peter Kalkavage, and Eric Salem. Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1984. *Apology*. Translated by Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Poirier, Richard. 1988. *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Porte, Joel. 1966. *Emerson and Thoreau: Transcendentalists in Conflict*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.
- Reid, Heather L. 2010. "Leadership as Virtue in Classical Philosophy." In *Political and Civic Leadership: A Reference Handbook*. Los Angeles: Sage, 49–55.
- Ricci, David. 1987. *The Tragedy of Political Science: Politics, Scholarship, and Democracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Richardson, Robert D. 1995. *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Robinson, David M. 2009. *Emerson and the Conduct of Life: Pragmatism and Ethical Purpose in the Later Works*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ruderman, Richard S. 1997. "Democracy and the Problem of Statesmanship." *The Review of Politics* 59.4: 759–787.
- Sacks, Kenneth S. 2003. *Understanding Emerson: "The American Scholar" and His Struggle for Self-Reliance*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Seidelman, Ronald and Edward J. Harpham. 1985. *Disenchanted Realists: Political Science and the American Crisis*. Albany: SUNY Press.

- Shklar, Judith N. 1998. *Redeeming American Political Thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Storing, Herbert J. 1980. "American Statesmanship Old and New." In *Bureaucrats, Policy Analysts, Statesmen: Who Leads?* Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 88–113.
- Strauss, Leo. 1978. *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. 2000. *Democracy in America*. Translated by Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Von Cromphout, Gustaaf. 2003. *Emerson's Ethics*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.
- Weaver, David R. 1997. "Leadership, Locke, and The Federalist." *American Journal of Political Science* 41.2: 420–446.
- West, Cornel. 1989. *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Whicher, Stephen. 1971. *Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.