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## Why Ralph Waldo Emerson Is A Virtue Ethicist

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# WHY RALPH WALDO EMERSON IS A VIRTUE ETHICIST

by

CHRISTOPHER PORZENHEIM

Under the Direction of Eric Wilson, PhD

## ABSTRACT

Ralph Waldo Emerson's status as a canonical figure in American history and literature is firmly established, but there is little agreement on his place within the philosophical canon. The most prominent interpretations classify him as either a "pragmatist" or an "Emersonian moral perfectionist." Yet, there is no consensus on whether these labels are accurate. I argue for an alternative hermeneutic approach to Emerson. Emerson should be read as a virtue ethicist.

INDEX WORDS: Virtue, Emerson, Pragmatism, Transcendentalism, Perfectionism, Philosophy

WHY RALPH WALDO EMERSON IS A VIRTUE ETHICIST

by

CHRISTOPHER PORZENHEIM

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2021

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2021

WHY RALPH WALDO EMERSON IS A VIRTUE ETHICIST

by

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis wouldn't exist if not for my family and friends. I owe thanks to my parents for countless hours of patient listening and tireless support and my sister, MJ Porzenheim, without whom I would be much less of a person. I am similarly indebted to friends like Malek Samman, Audric Figueroa, Ryan Hitch, Michael Barrow, Katherine Vechio and Aaron Richardson.

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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

*CW* = *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. 12 vols. Ed. Edward Waldo Emerson. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1903-1904.

*EAW* = *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*. Ed. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

*EL* = *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. 3 vols. Ed. Stephen E. Whicher, Robert E. Spiller, and Wallace Williams. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959-1972.

*LL* = *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson: 1843-1871*. 2 vols. Ed. Ronald Bosco, Joel Myerson. University of Georgia Press, 2001.

*J* = *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. 16 vols. Ed. William H. Gilman, et al. Harvard University Press, 1960-1982.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Ralph Waldo Emerson's status as a canonical figure in American history and literature is firmly established, but there is little agreement on his place within the philosophical canon. The most prominent interpretations classify him as either a "pragmatist" or an "Emersonian moral perfectionist."<sup>1</sup> Yet, there is no consensus on whether these labels are accurate. I will argue for an alternative approach.<sup>2</sup> Emerson should be read as a virtue ethicist.

In the rest of this thesis, I summarize the arguments of scholars who have already considered if Emerson is a virtue ethicist. I argue these scholars are not nearly as persuasive as they could be because they do not employ adequate criteria for who counts as a virtue ethicist. Thus, I summarize Julia Annas' criteria for membership in the category of a "virtue ethicist" and show that Emerson fits Annas' criteria. After showing it is accurate to label Emerson a virtue ethicist I conclude by offering five reasons why seeing Emerson as a virtue ethicist matters.

## 2 BUELL, CAFARO, LYSAKER AND URBAS ON EMERSON AS A VIRTUE ETHICIST

To my knowledge, only four scholars have explicitly considered whether Emerson is a virtue ethicist.<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Buell (2003) and Philip Cafaro (2004) independently argue that

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<sup>1</sup>Pragmatist and Emersonian moral perfectionist readings of Emerson are now common. Urbas (2013) dates the start of this "era" of Emerson's "philosophical rehabilitation" to Stanley Cavell's 1978 essay "Thinking of Emerson" in Cavell (2003). For Emersonian moral perfectionist readings of Emerson, see Cavell (1990, 2003, 2004), Saito (2001, 2005), Kovalainen (2010), Frank (2011), Laugier (2010), Mulhall (2020). For pragmatist readings, see Poirier (1987, 1992), West (1989), Goodman (1990) Robinson (1993), Lopez (1996), Stuhr (1997), Saito (2001, 2005), Anderson (2006), Albrecht (2012).

<sup>2</sup>If John Stuhr (1997) is right and "pragmatism" is necessarily defined by the Socratic question, pragmatist readings of Emerson are compatible with virtue ethicist readings of Emerson. See Stuhr (1997), ix-x. However, as I shall show later, it is not possible to consistently believe that a virtue ethicist can also be an Emersonian moral perfectionist.

<sup>3</sup>I thank Sandra Dwyer and Eric Wilson for useful suggestions on structuring this section.

Emerson is a virtue ethicist for the same reason. They think Emerson's ethics focus more on character development rather than on isolated actions.<sup>4</sup> While I agree with them, this is not sufficient to show we should call Emerson a virtue ethicist.

In contrast, John Lysaker (2008) is wary of considering Emerson a virtue ethicist even though he thinks there are similarities. Specifically, Lysaker thinks Emerson resembles Aristotle in his concept of character and account of friendships inspired by virtue.<sup>5</sup> Yet Lysaker refuses to conclude Emerson should be classified as a virtue ethicist because "Emerson's thought shows signs of too many schools of ethical thought to fit neatly into any one [like virtue ethics]."<sup>6</sup> In other words, Lysaker is skeptical about classifying Emerson as a virtue ethicist because he thinks Emerson's ethics is too heterogeneous for any label—including virtue ethics—to be *neatly* accurate.<sup>7</sup> But, Lysaker's negative conclusion is questionable, because it only asserts without providing any evidence that a significant enough amount of Emerson's ethics is incompatible with the category of virtue ethics. As I will show, this is not the case.

Finally, Joseph Urbas (2021) thinks that Emerson is a virtue ethicist because he thinks Emerson's virtue of prudence entails a belief in the unity of the virtues.<sup>8</sup> While I agree with

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<sup>4</sup>Buell (2003), 212. Cafaro (2004), 6-9.

<sup>5</sup>Lysaker (2008), 127-128, 146. Lysaker is not alone in drawing attention to Emerson's philosophy of friendship as a point of comparison between him and other virtue ethicists. For a Confucian reading of Emerson's account of friendship, see Foust (2017), 19-40. For a Platonic and Neoplatonic reading, see Hodder (2010). For a Platonic and Aristotelean reading see Crosswhite (2010). For a reading which compares Emerson and Aristotle and Cicero, see Lynch (2005), 45-46, 49-50. For a Stoic and Platonic reading see, Berry (1961) 187-200.

<sup>6</sup>Lysaker (2008), 208.

<sup>7</sup>In a more recent work, *After Emerson* (2017), John Lysaker argues that Emerson was sometimes reluctant to be called a philosopher, and in some respects, should not be considered one. For example, Emerson openly refuses to state premises and conclusions in the way that is sometimes considered characteristic of philosophy. For Lysaker's careful and commendable reconstruction of Emerson's relationship to philosophy, see Lysaker (2017) 132-166.

<sup>8</sup>Urbas (2021) 110-115.

Urbas that Emerson believes in the unity of the virtues, and that this suggests he likely is a virtue ethicist, this alone is not a sufficient reason to call him a virtue ethicist; some virtue ethicists believe in the unity of the virtues, some do not.

Ultimately, none of these scholars' arguments can adequately determine whether Emerson is or isn't a virtue ethicist because they do not offer enough of the relevant criteria. That said, I think it uncharitable to assert their arguments are inadequate without mentioning what would be obvious to anyone who reads their works. In the context of their monographs, Buell, Cafaro, Lysaker and Urbas only wrote a few sentences on the subject of Emerson as a virtue ethicist. While Emerson's status as a virtue ethicist is my focus, it is not the primary argumentative concern of any of these scholars. These scholars had bigger fish to fry.<sup>9</sup>

But, since I aim to show that Emerson meets the relevant criteria for a virtue ethicist, I will summarize Julia Annas' relatively uncontroversial criteria which distinguish between ancient Greek philosophies of virtue ethics and modern moral theories (deontological or utilitarian).<sup>10</sup> Then, armed with these criteria, I will show that Emerson can meet all of them.

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<sup>9</sup>Buell (2003) aims to provide a general introduction to Emerson's life and work, while Cafaro's (2004) primary thesis is that Henry David Thoreau is a virtue ethicist. Whereas Lysaker (2008) aims to present an account of Emerson's theory of self-culture and Urbas (2021) seeks to give an account of Emerson's entire philosophy as a whole.

<sup>10</sup>Why have I not supported my argument with work from other seminal scholars of virtue ethics such as Slote (1992), Hursthouse (1999), MacIntyre (2007) and so on? I have chosen to employ Annas (1993) alone for two reasons. (1) Using other scholars' works in addition to Annas would needlessly over complicate my argument for my readers who know little about virtue ethics. (2) Relative to these other works, Annas is more focused on distinguishing between the shared assumptions and specific points of disagreement between virtue ethicists.

### 3 JULIA ANNAS ON THE NATURE OF ANCIENT GREEK VIRTUE ETHICS

Julia Annas' *Morality of Happiness* (1993) lays out assumptions, methods, and aims she argues unite ancient theories of virtue ethics.<sup>11</sup> I will focus on three major criteria.<sup>12</sup>

Annas' first criterion is that virtue ethicists are more ethically concerned with developing our character across our entire life rather than on isolated actions, outcomes, rules or duties.

There are three major ethical categories in contemporary professional philosophy: virtue ethics, deontology, and consequentialism. Annas' *Morality of Happiness* (1993) was instrumental in distinguishing ancient Greek virtue ethics from "modern ethical theories" by which she means deontological and consequentialist theories. In contrast to the virtue ethicist:

[The deontologist] embodies the idea that the basic questions in ethics are those concerning what one ought to do and what one's duties are; the latter [the consequentialist] embodies the idea that the fundamental ethical questions are rather those as to how one should produce the best consequences.<sup>13</sup>

In short, Annas thinks that deontologists and consequentialists are typically not as interested in evaluating our character and virtues across our entire life as they are in ethically evaluating duties, rules or consequences in isolated moments. This is not to say that virtue ethicists do not care about duties, rules and outcomes: "Rule following, the notion of duty, appeal to what is

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<sup>11</sup>While Annas (1993) often writes about "ancient ethics" in the universalizing abstract, she is always referring only to Ancient Greek virtue ethics. Annas is not, for example, referring to Classical Chinese ethics which is often recognized as another form of ancient virtue ethics — though it can be controversial among scholars of Classical Chinese ethics to use the label "virtue ethics." Therefore, I only occasionally follow Annas in referring to "ancient ethics" simpliciter, because I think doing so accidentally reinforces the mistaken idea that the only "ancient philosophy" worthy of the moniker is Greek. For introductory works on Chinese ethics as a virtue ethics see Van Norden (2007, 2011), Ivanhoe (2017). For criticism of using the term "virtue ethics" for Chinese ethics see Ames (2011), Neville (2016). For arguments against the idea that the only ancient philosophy worthy of the moniker is Greek see Van Norden (2017).

<sup>12</sup>I thank Tim O'Keefe for his invaluable help with this entire section.

<sup>13</sup>Annas (1993), 6.

beneficial or useful— do have a place within the ancient theories” but this place is subordinate to the overriding importance of virtue and our character across our entire life.<sup>14</sup>

Annas’ second criterion is that virtue ethicists typically posit a “final end” for our lives.<sup>15</sup> The assumed “entry point for ethical reflection” in virtue ethics is the Socratic question “How ought I to live” or, ‘What should my life be like?’<sup>16</sup> The pupil is invited to consider their entire life. Are they satisfied with their “life as a whole, with the way it has developed and promises to continue?” Once we reflect on our life as a whole, Annas argues we naturally conclude that some of the goods we seek in life are means to ends, and some are ends in themselves.<sup>17</sup> All goods are “nested in a hierarchy of goods.”<sup>18</sup> For example, I leave my home to go to the gym, I go to the gym for health, I pursue health to live well, and so on. In order to give direction to our lives as a whole, we posit a “final end” or *telos* towards which we do, and should, direct all the actions that make up our lives.<sup>19</sup> Otherwise, we have no consistent criterion by which to decide between two goods or actions when both seem equally desirable.<sup>20</sup>

*Eudaimonia*, often translated as ‘happiness,’ is nominally agreed upon by Ancient Greek virtue ethicists as the “indeterminate” and conceptually “thin” specification of the final good towards which our lives as a whole should aim.<sup>21</sup> We can only be guided by “a thin and weak specification of” the final end because “until we have reflected in depth about the virtues [and

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<sup>14</sup>Annas (1993), 6. Although Annas does not note it, deontological and utilitarian ethical theories can be concerned with virtue and character.

<sup>15</sup>One interesting exception to this rule are the Cyrenaics. See, Annas (1993), 38.

<sup>16</sup>Annas (1993), 27-28

<sup>17</sup>Annas (1993), 28-29.

<sup>18</sup>Annas (1993), 31.

<sup>19</sup>Annas (1993), 31.

<sup>20</sup>Annas (1993), 32.

<sup>21</sup>Annas (1993), 46.

become virtuous] we are in no position to make our final end determinate.”<sup>22</sup> When Annas refers to a “thin” final end she is referring to the distinction in contemporary philosophy between ethically “thick” and “thin” concepts. This distinction will be critical much later in this essay, so I will briefly clarify it now. Put simply, concepts with less descriptive content are “thin.” More descriptive content makes a concept “thick.”<sup>23</sup> Annas’ point is that in virtue ethics, the final end is a “thin” concept. In contrast, virtue is a “thick” concept for virtue ethicists.

Annas’ third criterion is that virtue ethicists, notwithstanding some disagreements, all share a “thick” conception of virtue with three distinct features.<sup>24</sup>

First, virtue is a disposition acquired through habituation.<sup>25</sup> Virtues are the result of our habitual choices, though virtues are not reducible to “reflexes” or “mindless habits.”<sup>26</sup> We can acquire virtues by habitually choosing to perform virtuous actions in the right situations. In other words, we can sculpt our character over time. We can try to perform just actions, even if we struggle initially, in order to slowly make our character more just.<sup>27</sup>

Second, virtue has an intellectual aspect. Notwithstanding some conceptual disagreements, all virtue ethicists believe that to fully “have the virtues, or even have [just] one particular virtue, the agent has to have *phronesis*, commonly translated as “prudence” or “practical wisdom.”<sup>28</sup> *Phronesis* is a necessary requirement for the possession of any or all the virtues because “true virtue requires a firm intellectual basis, and thus virtue requires

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<sup>22</sup>Annas (1993), 71.

<sup>23</sup>A classic example of “thin” v “thick”: “good” is “thin” but “courageous” is “thick” because saying someone is “good” is less descriptive than calling them “courageous.”

<sup>24</sup>Annas (1993), 48-49.

<sup>25</sup>Annas (1993), 49.

<sup>26</sup>Annas (1993), 51.

<sup>27</sup>For Annas’ full account of the dispositional aspect of virtue see Annas (1993), 49-52.

<sup>28</sup>Annas (1993), 73.

intelligence, the developed disposition to reason correctly in moral matters.”<sup>29</sup> In short, we need to develop and acquire reliable practical reasoning “skills” in order to be virtuous.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, each virtue has an affective component. The virtuous person is the one disposed to have the correct feelings when performing the morally correct action. They do not just do the right thing, they also feel the right way — without *any* countervailing feelings arising. The virtuous person differs from the *enkratic* (or “strong-willed”) person on these grounds. Unlike the virtuous person, the *enkratic* person feels the wrong way, but like the virtuous person, she knows what is right, and because of her strong will, she performs the correct action.<sup>31</sup> The virtuous person is superior to the *enkratic* person because she does not need to exercise self-restraint and is not disposed to have inappropriate feelings.<sup>32</sup>

#### 4 ANNAS’ FIRST CRITERION: EMERSON’S ETHICS AND THE SOCRATIC QUESTION

Many Emerson scholars would likely agree that Emerson’s ethics fit Annas’ first criterion; i.e. Emerson is ethically concerned with developing our character across our entire life rather than on isolated actions, outcomes, rules or duties.

For example, David Robinson (1982) has claimed that Emerson’s sermons, lectures and essays are all ultimately concerned with “self-culture”; that is, the theory and practice of how we

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<sup>29</sup>Annas (1993), 74.

<sup>30</sup>Annas (1993), 71-72. For Annas’ full account the intellectual aspect of virtue see Annas (1993), 66-84.

<sup>31</sup>Annas (1993), 53-54. Annas does not mention them, but it is helpful to compare examples of a virtuous and *enkratic* person to *akratic* and vicious persons to get a complete picture of how the three components of virtue work together in the virtuous person. In short, unlike the *enkratic* person, the *akratic* person is weak-willed, and so even though he knows what is right, he feels the wrong way and performs the wrong actions. Finally, the vicious person neither knows what is right, nor feels the right way, nor performs the right actions.

<sup>32</sup>Annas (1993), 53-54. For Annas’ full account of the affective aspect of virtue see Annas (1993), 53-65.

can reform our moral character.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Robert. D. Richardson (1995) has claimed that the question which concerned Emerson throughout his life was not “‘What can I know? But ‘How should I live?’; Emerson outlines the purpose of life [...] in terms of [...] self-cultivation.”<sup>34</sup> Echoing Richardson, Gustaaf van Cromphout (1999) argues that “the question of Socrates” is what motivates Emerson’s lifelong ethical inquiry; “Emerson embraced the: “comprehensive Greek view, according to which everything of value to the human good and thus conducive to the good life falls under the rubric of ethics.”<sup>35</sup> Similarly, John Lysaker (2008) has argued at monograph length that the question of how we should conduct our lives is the question uniting Emerson’s entire corpus. In Lysaker’s words: “It is no exaggeration to claim that wherever one turns in Emerson, self-culture is at issue. [...] *Conduct of Life* is thus not simply the title of one of Emerson’s late collections. It names that which his claims consistently invoke as a matter in question for both speaker and addressee.”<sup>36</sup> Citing Richardson, James Woelfel (2011) argued “Emerson sees individual self-knowledge and self-cultivation as the goals of human life, and he tells his hearers that this view of life represents a revival of ancient Stoic wisdom, rooted in the Delphic-Socratic maxim[.]”<sup>37</sup> More recently, Barry Andrews (2018) has built upon the work of Pierre Hadot (1995, 1998, 2009) to argue that Emerson’s concept of “self-culture” is directly modeled on the “spiritual practices” of self-cultivation in Hellenistic Philosophy. Specifically, Andrews claims that: “As the Transcendentalists [like Emerson] practiced and promoted their version of the art of living, they looked to examples in the classical traditions, the Stoics, the

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<sup>33</sup>Robinson (1982), 182

<sup>34</sup>Richardson (1995), 16.

<sup>35</sup>Van Cromphout (1999), 1-2.

<sup>36</sup>Lysaker (2008), 7-8, 15.

<sup>37</sup>Woelfel (2011), 130.

Epicureans, and Neoplatonists in particular.”<sup>38</sup> Finally, and most recently, Joseph Urbas (2021) has argued that Emerson believes “that philosophy’s primary subject is life and the quest for wisdom rather than the epistemological tradition’s quest for certainty.”<sup>39</sup> In short, it would not be too controversial among Emerson scholars to suggest that Emerson meets Annas' first criterion.

Yet, this might be an undesirable conclusion for anyone wishing to argue Emerson’s ethics is primarily consequentialist or deontologist. On the one hand, to my knowledge, no one has claimed Emerson as a consequentialist. Indeed, Neal Dolan (2009) has observed that in his journals Emerson caustically rejected Benthamite utilitarianism.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, quite a few scholars have seen part or all of Emerson’s ethics as Kantian and thus implicitly deontologist.<sup>41</sup> Ultimately, while all their arguments are relevant, Emerson himself can best resolve whether he meets Annas’ first criterion.<sup>42</sup>

Emerson is often at pains to persuade us we should be more ethically concerned with our character and life as a whole, rather than isolated duties, rules, or outcomes. Throughout Emerson’s essays, one of his frequent rhetorical targets of abuse is a morally confused or vice-ridden social reformer seeking to realize their ideal ethical or political outcomes. Consider “The Method of Nature,” where Emerson writes:

*The reforms whose fame now fills the land with Temperance, Anti-Slavery, Non-Resistance, No Government, Equal Labor, fair and generous as each appears, are poor bitter things when prosecuted for themselves as an end. To every reform, in proportion to its energy, early disgusts are incident, so that the disciple is surprised at the very hour of his first triumphs, with chagrins, and sickness, and a general distrust: so that he shuns his associates, hates the enterprise which lately seemed so fair, and meditates to*

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<sup>38</sup>Andrews (2017), 95.

<sup>39</sup>Urbas (2021), 107.

<sup>40</sup>Dolan (2009), 72.

<sup>41</sup>For scholars comparing some aspect of Emerson’s philosophy to Kant see: Cavell (1988), Van Leer (1986), Goodman (1990), Van Cromphout (1999), Walls (2003), Cladis (2009), Greenham (2007, 2012), Dolan (2009), Grimstad (2010), Arsic (2010), Cameron (2010).

<sup>42</sup>I thank Eric Wilson for suggesting helpful ways to re-work this section entirely.

cast himself into the arms of that society and manner of life which he had newly abandoned with so much pride and hope. Is it that he *attached the value of virtue to some particular practices*, as the denial of certain appetites in certain specified indulgences, *and afterward found himself still as wicked and as far from happiness* in that abstinence as he had been in the abuse? But *the soul can be appeased not by a deed but by a tendency*. It is in a hope that she feels her wings. *You shall love rectitude, and not the disuse of money or the avoidance of trade; an unimpeded mind, and not a monkish diet; sympathy and usefulness, and not hoeing or coopering.*<sup>43</sup>

In this passage, Emerson argues that disciples of various social reform movements supporting “fair” causes often abandon them in favor of cultural conservatism, precisely because they mistakenly attached “the value of virtue” to a set of “particular practices.” These disciples do not realize that what matters is not the regulation of one’s own or other’s single “deeds”, but the lifelong “tendency” of our own and other’s character. What is of primary importance is “rectitude”, “an unimpeded mind” as well as “sympathy and usefulness.” What is of secondary importance are “particular practices” like “the disuse of money”, “a monkish diet” much less “hoeing or coopering.” In other words, Emerson thinks our ethical priority should be our character and life as a whole, and also that it is mistaken to attribute virtue to isolated actions, duties, rules, or outcomes. On the basis of passages like these, Neal Dolan (2009) has plausibly claimed that one of the two major themes in Emerson’s political philosophy is “the priority of virtue.”<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Joseph Urbas (2021) has also argued that “For Emerson, politics is at bottom an affair of character.”<sup>45</sup> Indeed, Emerson asserts his belief in the ethical priority of virtue and character in one of the most notorious and misunderstood passages in “Self-Reliance”:

*I ought to go upright and vital, and speak the rude truth in all ways. If malice and vanity wear the coat of philanthropy, shall that pass? If an angry bigot assumes this bountiful cause of Abolition, and comes to me with his last news from Barbadoes, why should I not say to him, 'Go love thy infant; love thy wood-chopper: be good-natured and modest: have that grace; and never varnish your hard, uncharitable ambition with this incredible tenderness for black folk a thousand miles off. Thy love afar is spite at home.'* Rough and graceless would be such greeting, but truth is handsomer than the affectation of love.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Emphasis Mine. CW 1: 214-215.

<sup>44</sup>Dolan (2009), 178-187.

<sup>45</sup>Urbas (2021), 255.

<sup>46</sup>Emphasis Mine. CW 2: 51.

This passage is often mistakenly interpreted to suggest Emerson objects to the aim of abolitionism, condones slavery, or condemns all abolitionists as vicious bigots.<sup>47</sup> But, in fact, Emerson explicitly assumes that abolitionism is a philanthropic and “bountiful” political cause and by implication that slavery is an evil and that not all abolitionists are necessarily vicious. Emerson is considering a different question than the merits of abolitionism and all abolitionists. Emerson is asking us to consider a more general moral problem that the example of a vicious abolitionist pose: what should a person committed to speaking the rude truth say to a vicious social reformer supporting a just cause?

Emerson’s answer reveals his ethical priorities, whether or not we agree with them. Emerson thinks a truthful person should criticize vicious social reformers’ mistaken ethical priorities and their vices, not overlook either. The hypothetical abolitionist’s desirable political outcome, with all its proposed ethical rules and duties, does not excuse his *more important* character failings; it does not excuse his habitual “malice,” “vanity,” “anger” and bigotry. Emerson finds this abolitionists “tenderness” and “love” for “black folk” who are distant strangers “incredible” (as in literally unbelievable) given his vicious character and habitual “spite” to those most close to him, e.g., his “infant” and the local “woodchopper.” Emerson believes the “truth” of the matter is that we should be willing to condemn this vicious reformer,

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<sup>47</sup>Donald Pease (2010), for example, thinks that in this passage Emerson expresses no “solidarity” with abolitionism, an “aversion” to it in general, and even leaves himself open to the charge that he had “compromised with slave power.” See Pease (2010) 154. Arriving at a similar conclusion for different reasons, James Read (2011) claims that in this passage Emerson has urged the hypothetical abolitionist to “drop” opposing slavery “altogether” because Emerson is more ethically concerned with what is “present and directly experienced” rather than what is “abstract and distant.” See Read (2011) 158. Whereas Jason Frank (2011) thinks that Emerson is critiquing *all* abolitionists as “partial, single-issue bigots and fanatics.” See Frank (2011), 388-389. Yet, Cavell (2003) offers perhaps the strangest misreading of this passage, suggesting that Emerson is worrying that he is insufficiently virtuous to side with the abolitionists against slavery. See Cavell (2003), 195.

not just for his vices, but also for his confused ethical priorities. Even though he grants that slavery is an evil political institution, Emerson remains committed to the ethical priority of virtue and character across one's lifetime. Like the reformers Emerson criticizes in "The Method of Nature", the abolitionist in "Self-Reliance" has mistakenly attributed the value of virtue to a specific set of ethical and political outcomes.

One might object to Emerson, however, and argue that an abolitionist's character flaws are ethically less important than ending slavery. This objection (that Emerson is foolishly prioritizing cultivating virtue over desired outcomes) concedes that Emerson shares the ethical priorities a virtue ethicist does. This objection disputes Emerson's reasons for this conclusion.<sup>48</sup> But we don't need to agree with Emerson's reasons to conclude he meets Annas' first criterion.

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<sup>48</sup>I suspect Emerson thinks that an abolitionist's character flaws are ethically more important than ending slavery because he thinks that excusing some vices to combat vicious things is not just morally hypocritical, but also likely to be politically ineffective. Emerson would have two reasons to arrive at this conclusion, one metaphysical and one historical. Emerson's metaphysical argument would likely be that vice undermines the political power of individuals because it puts them in metaphysical conflict with the moral nature of the universe. For evidence Emerson would make this metaphysical argument, consider Emerson's claims that "all nature is the rapid efflux of goodness executing and organizing itself" and that "[c]haracter is this moral order seen through the medium of an individual nature" and, finally, that "all power is of one kind, a sharing of the nature of the world." *CW* 2: 310, 3: 95-96, 6: 56. In contrast, Emerson's historical argument would likely be that opposition to slavery that aims only at legal and political outcomes is, even if a necessary starting point, not sufficient to address the root causes of slavery, which Emerson diagnoses as a vicious love of wealth and power alongside a mistaken (hence vicious) belief in the racial inferiority of "the Niggers." *EAW*: 17-18, 35-36. For evidence Emerson would make this historical argument, consider Emerson's accurate observation that even when slavery was legally ended in the British West Indies that the political subjection of blacks to whites continued because the vices that supported slavery remained undisturbed: "the habit of oppression was not destroyed by a law[.]" *EAW*: 17. Thus, for both metaphysical and historical reasons, Emerson would probably argue that excusing your own vices while seeking to end vicious institutions is moral hypocrisy that will prove politically ineffective: "[If] I am selfish, then there is slavery, or the effort to establish it, wherever I go[.]" *CW* 1: 279-280.

Another might object that I have yet to give any examples of Emerson directly stating that rule-following and duty are subordinate to virtue and character. In response, I would argue that Emerson effectively makes such claims in “Duty” and “Self-Reliance.”

I believe “Duty” reveals Emerson thinks duty is ethically subordinate to virtue:

Deeply considered all Virtue leads us into the presence of that sublime Vision of the right which always lies before the mind, imposing on it a perfect obligation. [...] This then is the best account of *virtue* at which we are at present [in 1839] able to arrive, that, it is the spontaneity of the will, bursting up into the world as *a sunbeam out of the aboriginal cause*, This is virtue. *And what is duty? It is the endeavor of man to obey this light*: the voluntary conforming our action to the whole; to the inward sentiment never quite absent; the uniform preference of the whole to the particular. *Duty is the application of the sentiment of virtue to the varying events of every day*, in making which, all greatness consists. *The measure of the force of the principle [of duty] is of course in the temptation of the sense.*<sup>49</sup>

There are two ways in which Emerson subordinates “duty” to “virtue” above. For one, these passages imply a virtuous person is ethically superior to a dutiful person. It is our “duty” to resist “temptation of the sense” in order so that we may be able to reliably do what is virtuous throughout “the varying events of the day.” Thus, duty consists, at least in part, in an obligation to resist the temptation towards acting viciously in specific moments, while a virtue consists, at least in part, in a disposition to reliably act a certain way through all the events of the day. This suggests that a virtuous person is superior to a dutiful person, insofar as a virtuous person can reliably act properly without suffering from temptation, but a dutiful person must struggle with temptation towards vice from moment to moment.<sup>50</sup>

The second way in which these passages indicate Emerson thinks duty is subordinate to virtue is because of the way Emerson defines the relationship between the terms. Virtue is a “sunbeam out of the aboriginal cause” while duties are only “the endeavor of man to obey this light.” This definition of virtue is admittedly unsatisfying in some respects (What is the

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<sup>49</sup>Emphasis Mine. *EL* 3: 139, 144.

<sup>50</sup>As we shall see later when we examine Emerson on virtue in detail, Emerson argues in favor of this conclusion; that the truly virtuous need not dutifully struggle with temptation.

aboriginal cause? What is a sunbeam coming out of it?) which is perhaps one reason why Emerson presents this definition of virtue as tentative, only “the best account” at which he is “at present able to” articulate in 1839. That said, as tentative and ambiguous as Emerson thinks this definition of virtue is, his account of the relationship between virtue and duty is unambiguous and stated without any hesitation. Virtue is a sunbeam, duties are merely the human attempt to obey the light from this sunbeam. Put less metaphorically, duties derive themselves and their ethical importance from virtue (whatever virtue is) but duties are not reducible to virtue itself. Therefore, it seems like Emerson’s notion of duty is ethically subordinate to his concept of virtue because he appears to think that the virtuous person is superior to the dutiful person and that the ethical importance of duty derives from virtue.<sup>51</sup>

A different passage from “Self-Reliance” provides compelling evidence Emerson thinks rule-following is a secondary concern relative to virtue and character:

*The other terror that scares us from self-trust is our consistency; a reverence for our past act or word, because the eyes of others have no other data for computing our orbit than our past acts, and we are loath to disappoint them. [...] It seems to be a rule of wisdom never to rely on your memory alone, scarcely even in acts of pure memory, but to bring the past for judgment into the thousand-eyed present, and live ever in a new day. In your metaphysics you have denied personality to the Deity: yet when the devout motions of the soul come, yield to them heart and life, though they should clothe God with shape and color. Leave your theory, as Joseph his coat in the hand of the harlot, and flee. A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines [theologians]. With [foolish] consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said to-day.*<sup>52</sup>

In these passages Emerson notes that a desire for “consistency” or a rule-following “reverence for our past act or word” can easily prevent us from practicing “self-trust”—which Emerson defines in “The American Scholar” as the virtue in which “all the virtues are comprehended.”<sup>53</sup>

Thus, Emerson’s concern is that a desire for rule-following can prevent us from acting

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<sup>51</sup>For other passages where Emerson appears to articulate the relationship between duties and virtues, see *CW* 1: 211, 2: 139, 291, 11: 186.

<sup>52</sup>Emphasis Mine. *CW* 2: 56-57.

<sup>53</sup>*CW* 1: 104.

virtuously. Emerson is not, however, objecting to rule following or consistency as a rule. Note how Emerson claims it is “a rule of wisdom” to avoid a mistaken reverence for too consistent rule following and “bring the past for judgement into the thousand-eyed present.” Problematic rule-following (“a foolish consistency”) consists in not changing our actions or thoughts to what we now recognize as superior because “we are loath to disappoint” others by contradicting ourselves. In other words, “Self-Reliance” posits that the foolish mistakenly prioritize consistency and rule following over developing their moral and intellectual character, while the wise think consistent rule following valuable insofar as it aims at virtue and wisdom. In short, this often anthologized passage from “Self-Reliance” reveals that Emerson thinks rule following is of ethical value, but subordinate to things like the pursuit of virtue and wisdom.

In conclusion, I have argued that Emerson thinks that rule following, duties, and outcomes are important moral subjects, but of secondary concern compared to the overriding importance of virtue and character across one’s life. Ultimately, Emerson’s ethical priorities reveal that he has the ethical focus of a virtue ethicist, not a utilitarian or deontologist. Thus, Emerson fits Annas’ first criterion; i.e. he is more ethically concerned with developing our character across our entire life rather than on isolated actions, outcomes, rules or duties.

## **5 ANNAS’ SECOND CRITERION: TELEOLOGY AND THE FINAL END IN EMERSON’S ETHICS**

Emerson also meets Annas’ second criterion; his ethics possess a final end.<sup>54</sup> Emerson believes the process of cultivating our moral character is our final end. For example, in an 1837 “Address on Education” Emerson asks “What is the end of human life? It is not, believe me, the

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<sup>54</sup>I thank MJ Porzenheim for convincing me of this despite my vigorous initial skepticism. If not for her persistence, I would have remained wrong. I also thank Tim O’Keefe, Eric Wilson, John Garret and Joseph Urbas for invaluable help with sharpening this section.

chief end of man that he should make a fortune and beget children whose end is likewise to make a fortune, but it is, in a few words, that he should explore himself.”<sup>55</sup> Similarly, in an 1837 Introductory Lecture “Human Culture” Emerson claims that “His own culture—the unfolding of his nature, is the chief end of man.”<sup>56</sup>

Emerson's concept of self-cultivation (or “self-culture”) has long been recognized by scholars as influenced by ancient Greek conceptions of self-cultivation, 19th century Unitarian religious ideals of self-culture, and Goethe's more aesthetic ideal of *Bildung*. Simply put, “self-culture” is the catch-all term Emerson uses to describe the various processes by which someone can improve or “cultivate” their moral character. While a full account of Emerson's ideas about self-cultivation exceeds the scope of this essay (and hasn't yet been written) I suspect most Emerson scholars would agree that Emerson thought self-cultivation involved the study of the natural and social sciences, experience of beauty, analysis of historical moral exemplars, practice of journaling, and the company of others, whether friends, family, or society at large.<sup>57</sup>

Emerson explains why his *telos* is self-cultivation in “The Method of Nature”:

A man's wisdom is to know that all ends are momentary, that the best end must be superseded by a better. [...] You cannot bathe twice in the same river, said Heraclitus; and I add, a man never sees the same object twice: with his own enlargement the object acquires new aspects. Does not the same law hold for virtue? [...] I say to you plainly there is no end to which your practical faculty can aim, so sacred or so large, that, if pursued for itself, will not at last become carrion and an offence to the nostril. The imaginative faculty of the soul must be fed with objects immense and eternal. *Your end should be one inapprehensible to the senses; then will it be a god always approached, never touched; always giving health.*<sup>58</sup>

In sum, Emerson claims we can and always should be approaching a health-giving end which is tantamount to the process of self-cultivation. As we approach this *telos*, it will appear different to

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<sup>55</sup>EL 2: 199.

<sup>56</sup>EL 2: 215.

<sup>57</sup>For work which touches on what Emerson thought self-cultivation entailed, see Lysaker (2008) and Andrews (2017). For a work which focuses on the critical role of science in Emerson's philosophy see Walls (2003).

<sup>58</sup>Emphasis Mine. CW 1: 209, 214-216.

us over time. Therefore, if we make the mistake of trying to precisely define the final end with a single phrase or word, we will retard our moral progress with “an offence to the nostril.” We can always perfect ourselves further.<sup>59</sup> Thus, Emerson’s final end, self-cultivation, is a lifelong activity which aims at a state of moral perfection we can never achieve.

Yet, some may still deny that Emerson’s ethics has a *telos*. As I mentioned earlier, one of the most popular ways of interpreting Emerson as a philosopher is as a “Emersonian moral perfectionist” or *EMP*. Some scholars who have argued Emerson is an *EMP* have considered whether his ethics is teleological or has a *telos*. To the best of my knowledge, all these scholars of *EMP* have denied Emerson’s ethics has a *telos*.<sup>60</sup> This is not a coincidence.

The only thing that uncontroversially defines the category of *EMP* is its lack of teleology.<sup>61</sup> Stanley Cavell (1988) coined the category of *EMP* to safeguard Emerson from John Rawls withering criticisms of Aristotelian moral perfectionism in *A Theory of Justice* (1971).<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>Emerson explicitly claims in “Circles” that we can always further perfect our moral character: “the moral fact of the Unattainable, the flying Perfect [...] [is] [...] at once the inspirer and the condemner of every success [...] There is no virtue which is final; all are initial. The virtues of society are vices of the saint. The terror of reform is the discovery that we must cast away our virtues, or what we have always esteemed such, into the same pit that has consumed our grosser vices.” *CW* 2: 301, 316-317.

<sup>60</sup>Building on Cavell, Saito (2001) has argued that while *EMP* shares the Socratic ethical focus on life as a whole found in Plato and Aristotle, it “sharply contrasts with the teleological form of Plato’s and Aristotle’s perfectionism.” See Saito (2001), 394-395. Yet, on the other hand, Saito (2005) waffles on whether Emerson has a teleological ethics. Saito argues (1) that Emerson’s ethics do “not deny the concept of a *telos* per se” but that (2) his concept of self hood “rethinks teleology” despite the fact that (3) Emerson’s *telos* is “in opposition to classical Greek teleology.” See Saito (2005), 13, 73. Citing Cavell and Saito in his analysis of *EMP*, Heikki Kovalainen (2010) has argued that *EMP* is not a teleological theory; that *EMP* has no “final state or a goal waiting to be realized somewhere in the future, not a fixed *telos* orienting all our attempts to come closer to it: a crucial component of the perfectionist life is its goallessness.” See Kovalainen (2010), 7.

<sup>61</sup>I do, however, think that Urbas (2010) has made a strong case that thinking Emerson is an *EMP* entails (mistakenly) believing that Emerson’s ethics lacks any ontology.

<sup>62</sup>While arguing that Emerson is an *EMP*, Cavell states that he wants Rawls to be wrong, because Rawl’s work appears to potentially support the conclusion that Emerson is an elitist and

Cavell claims that the moral perfectionism Rawls is revolted by is a “teleological theory”, but *EMP* is “not a teleological theory at all.”<sup>63</sup> Given Cavell’s explicit refusal to provide any “definition” for *EMP*, it’s not clear anything is an uncontroversially true criterion for the category other than its lack of teleology.<sup>64</sup> Absent this criterion, *EMP* is indistinguishable from the “moral perfectionism” of an Aristotle or Plato, which is why this must be a necessary criterion for the category.<sup>65</sup> Yet, for whatever reason, Cavell doesn’t provide any sustained

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inegalitarian philosopher whose ideas are incompatible with “democratic life”, when in fact, Cavell wants to show that Emerson is “essential to that life.” See Cavell (1988), xxiv, 3, 48-55. The motive for creating the category of *EMP* is thus no mystery. Cavell wanted to recruit Emerson into Rawls’ philosophical project. This is worrisome, as it suggests *EMP* is an ad-hoc category marketing Emerson to Rawlsian social contract theorists. For more criticisms about *EMP* as a description of Emerson, see Urbas (2010, 2016, 2017).

<sup>63</sup>Cavell (1988), 48.

<sup>64</sup>The nebulous nature of *EMP* is not a bug. It’s a design feature. Cavell almost defines *EMP* when he claims it is a “dimension” or “tradition” of “the moral life” in “Western thought” running “from Plato and Aristotle to Emerson and Nietzsche” and even “Kant and Mill” which concerns “the state of one’s soul,” “personal relationships,” and “the necessity of transforming oneself and of one’s society.” See, Cavell (1988), 2. But this is not the definition of *EMP*. Officially, there isn’t one. After offering the previous description Cavell disowns it, explicitly refusing to provide any official “definition” much less a list of “necessary and sufficient conditions for using the term”; “there is no closed list of features that constitute [Emersonian moral] perfectionism.” See, Cavell (1988), 4. Instead, as if Cavell were inventing a genre of films or stage-plays, Cavell gives a tentative, if not arbitrary, list of 28 *EMP* “themes” in Plato’s *Republic* and 66 different works with these *EMP* “themes.” See, Cavell (1988), 5-6. I say Cavell’s list of themes and works is “tentative” and maybe even “arbitrary” because Cavell invites us to add or remove themes *and* works as we see fit; “the presence or absence of any text [or theme] on the list is open to argument.” See, Cavell (1988), 5-6. Later, for whatever unstated reason, Cavell eventually decided to foreground 2 of his 28 *EMP* themes. According to Cavell (2004), the two key themes to *EMP* are lifelong self cultivation and a focus on the role of friends in this self cultivation. See Cavell (2004), 26-27. Yet, it’s unclear how to reconcile Cavell (2004) with Cavell (1988), because their accounts of *EMP* are incompatible, and Cavell does not argue for one instead of the other. In short, Cavell intentionally made it nearly impossible to determine the theoretical commitments of *EMP*.

<sup>65</sup>Even though Cavell refused to offer any necessary conditions for *EMP*, I propose a lack of teleology must be a necessary condition for *EMP*. If it is not, *EMP* is indistinguishable from normal moral perfectionism, in which case *EMP* is an ad-hoc category. For Cavell distinguishing *EMP* from moral perfectionism on the basis of teleology, see Cavell (1988), 48. For criticisms about applying *EMP* to Emerson, see Urbas (2010, 2016, 2017).

textual evidence showing Emerson ethics lacks a teleology. This is likely why Cavell gamely admits we should consider his ideas about Emerson and *EMP* as “provisional” “intuitions” marred by “unphilosophical haste” which are presented in “a more literary state, sometimes a more psychoanalytic state, than a philosopher might wish[.]”<sup>66</sup>

Aside from Cavell’s desire to entice Rawlsian contractualists into reading Emerson as a canonical philosopher, why did he assert Emerson’s ethics had no teleology?<sup>67</sup> It seems like Cavell mistakenly assumed that a *telos* like Aristotle’s cannot be an activity and its own end. Granting this assumption, Cavell would have been right when he claimed Emerson’s concept of lifelong self-cultivation was not also a *telos* akin to Aristotle’s.<sup>68</sup> But, this assumption, that a *telos* cannot be an activity and its own end, is inaccurate. Aristotle defines our *telos* as an activity of the soul expressing complete virtue in a complete lifetime.<sup>69</sup> In other words, our *telos* consists in ongoing activity,<sup>70</sup> and the end of that activity (having a virtuous life) is the activity itself.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Cavell (1988), xvii, 33. This reflects a general issue with Cavell’s work on Emerson. On the one hand, he likes to claim he is only offering provisional intuitions with nothing like necessary and or sufficient conditions. On the other hand, Cavell also likes to make definite truth claims about features of Emerson’s philosophy. Thus, Cavell can always deny he was ever making truth claims if you question his truth claims.

<sup>67</sup>For Cavell trying to entice Rawlsian social contract theorists, see Cavell (1988), xxiv, 3, 48-55.

<sup>68</sup>For Cavell claiming Emerson believed in lifelong self-cultivation, see Cavell (2004), 26-27.

<sup>69</sup>*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a10-30.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup>*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a10-20.

Thus, Emerson is no less a virtue ethicist (or even a normal moral perfectionist)<sup>72</sup> because his *telos* is a never-ending activity (which happens to be identical with lifelong self-cultivation).<sup>73</sup>

Ultimately, Emerson cannot both be an *EMP* and a virtue ethicist. One of the necessary conditions for each category are incompatible. While virtue ethicists generally employ teleology in their ethics, *EMP* philosophers never do. Therefore, Emerson is either one or the other, but not both. Because Emerson thinks we have a *telos*, Emerson cannot be an *EMP*.

Alternatively, someone who finds Cavell's anti-teleological readings of Emerson persuasive might, like Gustaaf Van Cromphout (1999), grant that Emerson's ethics have a *telos*, but object that Emerson's end is too "thin" for it to be comparable to the *telos* of virtue ethicists like Aristotle, Epicurus or the Stoics.<sup>74</sup> If this is true, then Emerson does not meet Annas' second criterion. But someone like Gustaaf Van Cromphout makes the mistake of confusing a virtue ethicists' *telos* for a "thick" rather than "thin" concept. As we saw Annas earlier note, our *telos* is a "thin" concept that will necessarily remain "thin" while we are developing the virtues: "to consider our *telos* as a fixed point to guide our thoughts about the virtues is to get matters wrong way round" because the process of becoming virtuous is what reveals the contents of the thin

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<sup>72</sup>Cavell was liable to make the mistaken assumption a *telos* cannot be an activity and its own end because, as he candidly notes, he was not familiar with the scholarship on moral perfectionism (and hence how Emerson's *telos* does not differ from the *telos* of a moral perfectionist like Aristotle): "It is clear that in wishing to characterize a particular moral outlook best (for me) in the writing of Emerson (and Thoreau), I have made no systematic survey of the philosophical literature on the subject of perfectionism." See, Cavell (1988), xviii.

<sup>73</sup>Emerson was not radical in his historical and cultural context for identifying our *telos* with self-cultivation. Many other Unitarian intellectuals in the 19th century did the same, including Emerson's mentors. See, Robinson (1982).

<sup>74</sup>Van Cromphout denies that we should think of Emerson as possessing a "teleological ethics" like Aristotle, Epicurus or the Stoics because Emerson does not presuppose "a relatively clear sense of the end aimed at"; Emerson does not know the detailed "contents" of the human *telos* only that ceaseless "Self-realization to be sure, *is* the end." See, Van Cromphout (1999), 57.

final end.<sup>75</sup> Thus, Emerson's *telos* is not unusual for being "thin" rather than "thick." It has enough descriptive content to meet Annas' second criterion and is comparable to the final ends of Aristotle, Epicurus, or the Stoics. In conclusion, Emerson meets Annas' second criterion; his ethics has a *telos*: the process of lifelong moral self-cultivation.

## 6 ANNAS' THIRD CRITERION: THE TRIPARTITE NATURE OF EMERSONIAN VIRTUE

Emerson meets Annas' third criterion because he thinks virtue is a disposition with affective and intellectual aspects. Neal Dolan (2009) has relevantly noted that:

it is safe to say that 'virtue' stands along with 'truth' as one of the most commonly used nouns in Emerson's writing. It is hard to think of a single address or essay in which the term is not invoked, and it occupies crucial turning points in many of Emerson's most important works.<sup>76</sup>

Indeed, in striking contrast to Emerson's usual aversion to defining his terms, Emerson assiduously defines and argues for his conception of virtue against popular misunderstanding. Three essays will reveal how Emersonian virtue meets Annas' third criterion.<sup>77</sup>

### 6.1 Virtue as Disposition in "Self-Reliance"

Emersonian virtue contains the first of the three necessary features in order to meet Annas' third criterion. "Self-Reliance" reveals Emersonian virtue is an acquired disposition to act in a certain way. Consider how "Self-Reliance" criticizes common but mistaken conceptions of virtue:

*Virtues are, in the popular estimate, rather the exception than the rule. There is the man and his virtues. Men do what is called a good action, as some piece of courage or charity, much as they would pay a fine in expiation of daily non-appearance on parade. Their works are done as an apology or extenuation of their*

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<sup>75</sup>Annas (1993), 71.

<sup>76</sup>Dolan (2009), 183.

<sup>77</sup>While there is scholarship covering the subject of Emerson's concept of virtue, none of this scholarship is focused on establishing whether Emerson is a virtue ethicist. For works which cover the subject of Emersonian virtue, see Berry (1961), Emanuel (1961), Bishop (1964), Van Leer (1982), Suckiel (1985), Dolan (2009), Van Cromphout (1999), Urbas (2016, 2021).

living in the world,—as invalids and the insane pay a high board. *Their virtues are penances*. I do not wish to expiate, but to live. My life is for itself and not for a spectacle. I much prefer that it should be of a lower strain, so it be genuine and equal, than that it should be *glittering and unsteady*. I wish it to be sound and sweet, and not to need diet and bleeding. [...] Character teaches above our wills. *Men imagine that they communicate their virtue or vice only by overt actions*, and do not see that virtue or vice emit a breath every moment. [...] *Why all this deference to Alfred, and Scanderbeg, and Gustavus?* Suppose they were virtuous; did they wear out virtue? As great a stake depends on your private act to-day, as followed their public and renowned steps.<sup>78</sup>

In these passages, Emerson mocks the “popular” idea that virtue is disclosed in isolated “overt” acts or in an “exception” to the everyday “rule” of someone’s habitual actions or “character.” We do not reveal our virtue in single voluntary acts of “penance”, or in a temporary "diet" or "bleeding." We reveal our “character”, our virtues and vices, in all our actions (and inactions) “private” and “public” whether or not we voluntarily “will” this.<sup>79</sup> Therefore, those who imagine that virtue requires single and spectacular “glittering and unsteady” acts of “expiation” are mistaken. Furthermore, when considering virtuous role models, we should not out of idolatrous “deference” neglect to cultivate a virtuous character ourselves. We too can acquire the (supposedly)<sup>80</sup> virtuous disposition of legendary military figures like the Anglo-Saxon King Alfred I (9th CE), the Albanian rebel against the Ottoman Empire, Skanderbeg (15th CE), or the Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus (17th CE). In short, Emerson sees virtue as an acquired

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<sup>78</sup>Emphasis Mine. *CW* 2: 52-53, 58, 63. Notably, the italic in “There is the man *and* his virtues” is Emerson’s own. Emerson’s use of italics here emphasizes just how wrong he thinks it is to conceive of virtue as something apart from our everyday character.

<sup>79</sup>Urbas (2021) argues that Emerson thinks that we reveal our character in our moments of inaction, not just in our voluntary actions. On the relationship between inaction and character in Emerson’s ethics and politics see Urbas (2021), 251-257.

<sup>80</sup>It’s easy to overlook, but by saying “suppose,” Emerson only commits himself to the position that we could and should become as virtuous as these military men are *supposed* to be. Emerson suggests his audience thinks these figures are virtuous for the sake of his argument, while distancing himself from claiming these military men were, in fact, virtuous role models.

disposition, and therefore his concept of virtue contains the first of the three features needed to meet Annas' third criterion.<sup>81</sup>

## 6.2 The Intellectual Aspect of Virtue in "Prudence"

Emersonian virtue also contains the second of the three features needed to meet Annas' third criterion. In "Prudence" it becomes clear Emersonian has the relevant intellectual aspect.<sup>82</sup> "Prudence" explicitly contrasts Emerson's account of prudence against popular opinion. Emerson claims that the virtue of prudence is a "faculty" of the mind by which we organize "the application of means to ends."<sup>83</sup> Emerson distinguishes between "false," "base," and "spurious" prudence relative to "true" and "higher" prudence. Emerson thinks that "true" and "higher" prudence entails the presence of all the other moral virtues.<sup>84</sup> In contrast, "false," "base," and "spurious" prudence is "detached" from the other moral virtues and is the result of seeing "prudence not to be a several faculty, but [only] a name for wisdom and virtue conversing with the body and its wants."<sup>85</sup> Thus, just as other virtues entail "true" prudence, "true" prudence entails all the other moral virtues.<sup>86</sup> On the basis of passages like these Edmund G. Berry (1961) and Joseph Urbas (2021) have plausibly argued that Emerson believes in the unity of the

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<sup>81</sup>For a reading of the above passages in "Self-Reliance" which emphasizes Emersonian virtues relationship with Nietzsche's ethics see Albrecht (2012) 78-85. For monograph length comparisons of Emerson's and Nietzsche's philosophy see Mikics (2003), Zavatta (2019).

<sup>82</sup>I thank Joseph Urbas for suggesting I improve this section by consulting "Prudence."

<sup>83</sup>CW 2: 223, 227.

<sup>84</sup>CW 2: 222-224, 235.

<sup>85</sup>CW 2: 222-224.

<sup>86</sup>Emerson vividly expresses this in the conclusion of "Prudence" like so: "Thus, truth, frankness, courage, love, humility, and all the virtues, range themselves on the side of prudence, or the art of securing a present well-being. I do not know if all matter will be found to be made of one element, as oxygen or hydrogen, at last, but the world of manners and actions is wrought of one stuff[.]" CW 2: 240-241. Emerson also indicates his belief in the unity of the virtues elsewhere when, in a lecture in support of a temperance society, he states that the virtue of temperance is required if we are to acquire any other virtue. *LL* 1: 73, 79.

virtues.<sup>87</sup> Urbas relevantly notes that Emerson states his belief in the unity of the virtues perhaps most explicitly in “The American Scholar”, where he defines “self-trust” as the virtue in which “all the virtues are comprehended.”<sup>88</sup>

In sum, Emerson’s account of “self-trust” and “true” and “higher” prudence reveals (1) that all virtues have the intellectual aspect of *phronesis* and (2) that Emerson thinks, like a Stoic, that the virtues are a unity.<sup>89</sup> Thus, Emerson’s account of prudence offers sufficient evidence to conclude Emersonian virtue possesses the second of the three features required to meet Annas’ third criterion.

### 6.3 The Affective Aspect of Virtue in “Spiritual Laws”

Emersonian virtue possesses the third of the three features needed for it to meet Annas’ third criterion. “Spiritual Laws” reveals Emersonian virtue has the necessary affective component. Again, Emerson contrasts popular ideas about virtue to his own:

Our moral nature is vitiated by any interference of our will. *People represent virtue as a struggle*, and take to themselves great airs upon their attainments, *and the question is everywhere vexed when a noble nature is commended, whether the man is not better who strives with temptation*. But there is no merit in the matter. Either God is there or he is not there. We love characters in proportion as they are impulsive and spontaneous. The less a man thinks or knows about his virtues the better we like him. [...] When we see a soul whose acts are all regal, graceful and pleasant as roses, *we must thank God that such things can be and are, and not turn sourly on the angel and say 'Crump is a better man with his grunting resistance to all his native devils.*<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>See Berry, (1961) 166-171 as well as Urbas (2021) 110-115. John Lysaker (2017) also notes that Emerson distinguishes between and true and false prudence and comes to similar conclusions about Emerson’s concept of prudence in “Prudence”: “Emerson’s response [to popular misconceptions of prudence] is something like an exhortation—be prudent but only within a teleological orientation funded by wisdom.” See Lysaker (2017), 142. That said, I disagree with Lysaker’s suggestion that the essay “Heroism” somehow “rejects or “opposes” the claims about prudence in “Prudence.” See Lysaker (2017), 142-143, 150-151. “Heroism” employs the same distinction between true/false prudence elaborated in “Prudence.” To wit, “Heroism” asserts that only false prudence competes with the virtue of heroism: “That false prudence which dotes on health and wealth is the butt and merriment of heroism.” *CW 2: 252.*

<sup>88</sup>*CW 1: 104.*

<sup>89</sup>All virtue ethicists believe virtue has an intellectual aspect, but not all virtue ethicists believe, like a Stoic, in “the unity of the virtues.” For more on this see, see Annas (1993), 66-84.

<sup>90</sup>Emphasis mine. *CW 2: 133-134.*

Emerson is considering whether a virtuous person would struggle to do virtuous actions because of countervailing feelings, or if they would lack such tempting feelings to begin with. Emerson invents a hypothetical individual named “Crump.” Crump knows the right thing to do but does not feel the right way and struggles to do the right thing because of his “native devils.” Crump stands in contrast to the hypothetical individual whose habitual actions are morally correct as well as “impulsive and spontaneous ... graceful and pleasant.” Emerson concludes that such individuals exist and are truly virtuous, unlike Crump, who struggles with “temptation.” Crump falls short of virtue not because he lacks the knowledge of the right thing to do, or fails to do the right thing, but because he fails to reliably feel the right way. It is a habitual “struggle” for Crump to do the right thing. The unstated conclusion in this passage is that many people mistakenly consider it virtuous to struggle to do the right thing.<sup>91</sup> Thus, the affective component of virtue is clearly present in Emersonian virtue, and therefore Emersonian virtue possesses the third of the three features required by Annas’ third criterion.

## 7 RE-EVALUATING BUELL, CAFARO, LYSAKER AND URBAS’ ARGUMENTS

Emerson’s ethics fits all three of Annas’ criteria. He focuses on the Socratic ethical concern for our life as a whole, not isolated rules duties or outcomes. His ethics have a *telos*, namely, self-cultivation. Finally, his concept of virtue has the key three features—it is a disposition with an affective and intellectual component.<sup>92</sup> Therefore, Emerson is a virtue ethicist.

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<sup>91</sup>Crump is a perfect portrait of the *enkratic* individual. He reliably lacks the right affect, but knows the right thing to do and does it. On a related note, Emerson was aware of and approved of Aristotle’s distinction between the *enkratic* and virtuous individual. *J* 3:427.

<sup>92</sup>I am not claiming that Emerson always uses all three of these aspects of the word “virtue” when he writes the word. He certainly does not. (Sometimes he refers to virtue as a kind of charismatic power or as the general excellence of something.) Nor am I claiming that Emerson is always in complete agreement with any or all virtue ethicists about the nature of virtue. My conclusion is only that Emerson can meet this criterion Annas offers despite if and when future scholarship finds ways in which Emerson’s concept of virtue sometimes differs from other virtue

We should now re-evaluate the arguments of other scholars who have already considered this possibility. Buell and Cafaro argued that Emerson was a virtue ethicist because his ethics focus on character and our lives as a whole rather than isolated actions, which is a true characterization of Emerson's ethics, though not a sufficient reason to call someone a virtue ethicist. Lysaker also thought that Emerson's ethics shared this Socratic focus. But he (accurately) did not think this was sufficient to determine Emerson was a virtue ethicist. Yet, Lysaker rejected calling Emerson a virtue ethicist for a different reason. Lysaker thought "Emerson's thought shows signs of too many schools of ethical thought to fit neatly into any one [like virtue ethics]." <sup>93</sup> I believe there are two important problems with this argument. <sup>94</sup>

The first is that Emerson does neatly fit into the category of virtue ethics. Emerson does not struggle to meet any of Annas' criteria. Ultimately, for an argument like Lysakers to refute my own, someone would need to show that there are significant enough elements of Emerson's philosophy that are incompatible with classifying him as a virtue ethicist. That would prove a difficult task, because "virtue ethics" is more like a common set of tendencies than a totalizing school of thought. This is the second problem with Lysaker's argument. It seems to rely on a false unstated premise, namely that a "virtue ethicist" cannot belong to other ethical categories. Yet, this is false. It is possible to be a virtue ethicist that also fits into other ethical categories.

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ethicists. Research nuancing and challenging my argument by comparing Emerson to specific virtue ethicists is something I desire to write and read, especially regarding Emerson's understudied engagement with Confucianism. But it will remain difficult to justify such work until researching Emerson as a philosopher of virtue ethics becomes less novel. For evidence that generations of scholars have marginalized and denied the influence of Confucianism on Emerson, see Foust (2017), 18-22. On Emerson's relationship to Confucianism see Simmons (2013), Takanashi (2014), Dolan and Wey (2015), Foust (2015, 2017).

<sup>93</sup>Lysaker (2008), 208.

<sup>94</sup>I thank Eric Wilson and Tim O'Keefe for suggesting some of the following replies to Lysaker. I also thank Aaron Richardson for helping clarify these replies further.

Consider, for example, an ancient virtue ethicist like Epicurus who is a hedonist with a contractarian political theory.<sup>95</sup> Or, perhaps influential medieval virtue ethicists like the Catholic Thomas Aquinas or the Muslim Ibn Miskawayh.<sup>96</sup> Or, why not more modern virtue ethicists like Adam Smith (who is also a moral sentimentalist) or Martha Nussbaum (who is also a feminist)?<sup>97</sup> Thus, to conclude that Emerson's ethics shows signs of too many schools of thought to neatly fit into virtue ethics is unconvincing because this conclusion relies on the false assumption that virtue ethics is a far more exclusive ethical category than it actually is.

Finally, Urbas argues that Emerson was a virtue ethicist because his concept of prudence entailed the unity of the virtues. Yet, while it is true Emerson believes in the unity of the virtues this alone is an insufficient reason to call someone a virtue ethicist.

Ultimately, Buell, Cafaro, Lysaker and Urbas each have their merits. Lysaker has the wrong conclusion, but for some good reasons. In contrast, Buell, Cafaro, and Urbas have the right conclusion for inadequate reasons.

## **8 CONCLUSION: WHY SEEING EMERSON AS A VIRTUE ETHICIST MATTERS**

My proposed label may be accurate, but why should anyone bother to use it? I will conclude with five reasons why I think it matters to recognize Emerson as a virtue ethicist.<sup>98</sup>

First, recognizing Emerson as a virtue ethicist would help clarify Emerson's key concept of "the moral sentiment." Over the last thirty years many Emerson scholars have plausibly argued

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<sup>95</sup>For Epicureanism as a virtue ethicist and contractarian see Thrasher (2013).

<sup>96</sup>For Aquinas as a virtue ethicist, see Nelson (1992). For Miskawah as a virtue ethicist see Zargar (2017).

<sup>97</sup>For Adam Smith as a virtue ethicist see Hanley (2017). I take it for granted Martha Nussbaum is famous enough as a virtue ethicist and feminist that I don't need to cite evidence for this claim.

<sup>98</sup>I thank Eric Wilson for suggesting I scrap the previous conclusion, good riddance to it. I also thank John Lysaker for generously talking through potential options for this conclusion, and Connor Kianpour for pushing me to directly answer the so what.

that the Scottish Enlightenment idea of the “moral sentiment” is the most important concept in Emerson’s ethics.<sup>99</sup> However, few have noticed “the moral sentiment” and “virtue” are inseparable for Emerson.<sup>100</sup> Gustaaf Van Cromphout (1999) has rightly suggested Emerson’s scandalous and famous “Divinity School Address” is the single best essay to read in order to

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<sup>99</sup>While the last thirty years have seen multiple scholars explicitly arguing that the moral sentiment is the most important concept in Emerson’s ethics, the general importance of this concept has never really been doubted. William James was perhaps the first to notice the importance of the concept to Emerson. William James (1911) claimed that if we want to understand Emerson’s key “conviction that divinity is everywhere” we need to understand “what he calls the moral sentiment.” Later, Stephen Whicher (1953) claimed that “the moral sentiment” is a term which “so often recurs” in Emerson’s writing in response to the challenge of Humean skepticism. See, Whicher (1953), 14-15, 175-176. More specifically, Jonathan Bishop (1964) argued that the moral sentiment “was a cornerstone of his [Emerson’s] faith”; a key part of “the moral dimension” of his thought and his general “ethical vocabulary.” See Bishop (1964), 66, 23, 68. Building on Whicher, Barbara Packer (1982) argued that Emerson’s concept of the moral sentiment is critical to understanding his response to skepticism, it was the “Archimedean point that gave him leverage on the slippery world of experience.” See, Packer (1982), 36. More generally, Merton Sealts (1992) argued that one of the “cardinal principles of Emerson’s thinking [...] [was] [...] what he liked to call ‘the moral sentiment’”; Emerson was “ever an apostle of the moral sentiment.” See, Sealts (1992), 208, 214. Influenced by Sealts, David Robinson (1993) argued that the “moral sentiment” is the key term in Emerson’s ethics; that it is his “bedrock of consistency” and “foundation of his earliest thinking and the most important point of continuity in his thinking from first to last.” See Robinson (1993), 7, 195. Similarly, Gustaaf Van Cromphout (1999) reluctantly admits that “a primary concern of Emerson’s [ethics] was to establish the universality of the moral sentiment” and thus this marks a “fundamental difference” between Emerson and Kant’s ethics. See Van Cromphout (1999), 34, 47. Echoing Van Cromphout, Neal Dolan (2009) has claimed that “the Scottish enlightenment idea of moral sentiment [is] at the heart of much of Emerson’s writing; indeed, it is arguably the cornerstone of his entire intellectual edifice.” See Dolan (2009), 200-201. Directly building on Robinson, Joseph Urbas has claimed that when “it comes to Emerson’s ethics and his vision of human perfectibility, *reference to the moral sentiment is not optional*, even if we find the doctrine dissatisfactory.” See Urbas (2010), 4. Berger (2015) has independently argued that “the continuity in Emerson’s thought regarding religious [and moral] sentiment and its radical effects has been obscured by the shifting rhetorical positioning of Emerson’s writing.” See Berger (2015), 479. Recently, Urbas (2016) has claimed that “the moral sentiment is indeed the best basis for any general account of the unity of Emerson’s thought.” See Urbas (2016), 157. Most recently, Urbas (2021) has provided such a general account of Emerson’s thought centered on Emerson’s concept of the moral sentiment.

<sup>100</sup>Emanuel (1961) and Bishop (1964) and Urbas (2016, 2021) have explicitly observed the connection, but are the only ones to do so far as I am aware.

understand Emerson’s concept of “the moral sentiment.”<sup>101</sup> Indeed, by sheer numbers, Emerson refers to “the moral sentiment” more often in this essay than in any other work in his corpus. A glance at the first four paragraphs of the “Divinity School Address” reveals that the “sentiment of virtue” and “the moral sentiment” are interchangeable terms and that “the moral sentiment” is present in “every virtuous act and thought” as it is “the essence of all religion.”<sup>102</sup> In other words, Emerson thinks possessing virtue is a sufficient condition for possessing “the moral sentiment” and vice versa. This means these two concepts cannot be fully understood in isolation from each other. This prompts an urgent question for any future work on Emerson’s ethics: how do we reconcile Emerson’s belief in the spontaneous and intuitive feelings of “the moral sentiment” with his belief in virtue as a disposition with affective and intellectual components?<sup>103</sup> Properly answering this question exceeds the scope of this thesis. That said, I speculate that the moral sentiment is, at least in part, one way Emerson refers to the affective state of perceiving or performing virtuous actions. In any event, much more work on this key conceptual relationship in Emerson’s ethics is clearly needed, but only made so obviously crucial by considering Emerson a virtue ethicist.<sup>104</sup> In short, by recognizing Emerson as a virtue ethicist, we gain a new tool to help demystify one of Emerson’s key concepts.

Second, recognizing Emerson as a virtue ethicist would help clarify the ongoing debate about Emerson’s political philosophy in general, and his philosophy of social reform in

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<sup>101</sup>Van Cromphout (1999), 36. Morton Sealts (1992) has relevantly observed that “the moral sentiment” is “the governing theme” of this address. See, Sealts (1992), 117.

<sup>102</sup>CW 1.120-122.

<sup>103</sup>While this isn’t a question Joseph Urbas sets himself the task of answering, I think he indirectly provides some potential answers in *The Philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (2021). This work is an invaluable resource for anyone considering this question. More than any other scholar Urbas has set himself the task of clarifying Emerson’s concept of the moral sentiment.

<sup>104</sup>I thank John Lysaker and Joseph Urbas for drawing this question to my attention.

particular. Disagreement arguably focuses on five subjects: whether the ethical priority Emerson gives to virtue (1) is theoretically coherent as a political philosophy, (2) practically useful, (3) generally good or bad, (4) entails racism, sexism or classism, or (5) allows Emerson's philosophy to be consistent with his historical support for reform movements.<sup>105</sup> If we recognize Emerson as a virtue ethicist, then this debate about Emerson turns out to fit within much larger debates in other disciplines about the theory, practice, and history of virtue ethics. Thus, considering Emerson a virtue ethicist is desirable, because it would allow Emerson scholars to make good use of the vast secondary literature on virtue ethicists and their political theories.<sup>106</sup> Borden Flanagan (2011) offers an excellent example of this approach, as he argues Emerson's political philosophy fuses liberalism's concern for liberty and equality with ancient aretaic concern for virtue and wisdom.<sup>107</sup>

Third, calling Emerson a virtue ethicist would help explain Emerson's well-known debts to ancient Greek, Christian, Chinese, Persian, Islamic, and Indian philosophers concerned with virtue and character. Recognizing Emerson as a virtue ethicist would aid scholars tracing and researching Emerson's different debts to these various philosophers. Rather than continuing to conduct their research in relative isolation from each other, designating Emerson as a virtue ethicist would offer a lingua franca for them to coordinate future research.

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<sup>105</sup>In David Robinson's (1993) still true words: "We are now inclined to ask whether Emerson's commitment to the individual self neutralized his support of socially progressive goals." See Robinson (1993), 40-41. Len Gougeon (2017) offers a recent and helpful introduction to these ongoing debates. See Gougeon (2017), 165-216.

<sup>106</sup>It works the other way too. Scholars interested in virtue ethicists, especially in the modern ones, might find Emerson has something exciting to offer them.

<sup>107</sup>Flanagan (2011). For the most complete work on Emerson's philosophical engagement with liberalism, see Dolan (2009).

A fourth reason to call Emerson a virtue ethicist is that it reveals a fatal flaw with one of the common readings of Emerson as a philosopher, i.e. reading Emerson as an *EMP*. I showed earlier that Emerson cannot both be a virtue ethicist and an *EMP*. This has urgent ramifications for all future work on Emerson as a philosopher. Future *EMP* advocates either need to redefine the key criteria of the category, refute my conclusions, or abandon using the category altogether.

Fifth, calling Emerson a virtue ethicist provides a new tool for the increasing number of scholars arguing Emerson should be seen as a canonical philosopher. If it became conventional to recognize Emerson as a virtue ethicist this would help normalize philosophical research on Emerson because “virtue ethics” is a canonical and well-defined category in contemporary professional philosophy. If Emerson is to become a canonical philosopher, then his scholarly advocates would probably benefit from advancing arguments, like my own, which situate Emerson in a canonical category with clearly established criteria.<sup>108</sup>

Ultimately, the best reason to consider Emerson a virtue ethicist is because it’s an accurate description. The same cannot necessarily be said of the other common but controversial philosophical labels for him.

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<sup>108</sup>“EMP” and “pragmatism” are not clearly defined categories in the contemporary academy, and while pragmatism is a canonical category *EMP* is virtually unknown outside Emerson studies.

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