

A Comparative Study of Emerson's Idealism and Aankara's Advaita Vedanta

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to define Emerson's idealism and spiritualism. An attempt is made to explore the affinity between Sankara's *Advaita Vedanta* and Emerson's Idealism. Primarily, the present study strives to understand the concept of spiritualism in general and what it means to Emerson in particular. His spiritualism and its relation with non-dualism are examined. The 19th century American society experienced drastic changes in the fields of art, literature, philosophy and religion. It was the age for the growth of novel ideas and skeptic ideologies. These fresh movements electrified artistic and philosophical perspectives of New England. This phenomenon is called American renaissance. This new revolution changed the attitude of the young intellectuals; they started a new philosophical movement called transcendentalism that rejected the established religious doctrines and traditions. **These** young intellectuals strove to liberate the society from the clutches of scepticism and materialism. The transcendentalists redefined spiritualism based on Emerson's doctrine of soul. This paper discusses Emerson's spiritualism, the doctrine of Over-soul and its relation with Sankara's *Advaita Vedanta*.

Keywords: Transcendentalism, Advaita Vedanta, Idealism, illusion, Maya vaada

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Introduction:

In the first half of the 19th century, a group of American intellectuals under the leadership of Emerson started a new philosophical, literary and religious movement in New England, later referred as transcendentalism. Transcendentalists rebelled against Unitarian Church, which failed completely in satisfying the human spiritual quest. Emerson and his followers propagated new ideas and tried to preach entirely a fresh intellectual and spiritual insight through their literary endeavors. According to Emerson, all human beings emerged from a single source that he called "The Over-Soul". In 1841, he published an essay titled „Over-soul“ in which he expounded the doctrine of Over-soul. In this doctrine, he defined his deity and referred God with various names such as Over-soul, Holy Ghost, and spirit etc...Emersonian doctrine articulates that every part and particle of this universe contains the

divine instinct and all beings are intrinsically related and united with that absolute being.

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Man always misidentifies himself with ego; hence he is unable to recognize the inherent infinite being within him and is not realizing his true nature. He remarks that we can directly experience God within us through intuition. One who actively engages in his spiritual purificatory process only can receive divine guidance through intuition. This spiritual enlightenment is the centre of Emerson's philosophy; hence he is regarded as a spiritualist rather than an idealist. Emerson initially reacted against religious supremacy on an individual and pleaded his contemporaries to trust their inner voice and to recognize their true nature. Emerson's concept of individualism and self assertion are primarily shaped by Indian Vedanta. Thus many of his philosophical concepts which defined his spiritualism have parallelisms with the basic tenets

of Advaita Vedanta such as Tatvamasi, Ahambrahmaasmi, Paaramarthika Gnana, etc... This paper traces similarities between Emerson's spiritualism and Sankara's Advaita Vedanta.

Emerson's idealism, mystical experiences, evolutionary philosophy and moral perfectionism influenced him in formulating his spiritualism and moral philosophy. In many respects, his spiritualism resembles Indian non-dualistic vision. He was a spiritual reformer who rejected the authority of religious institutions, condemned scriptures and all religious dogmas. He strongly advocated that nothing can help the individual in realizing the ultimate truth except intuition (one's inner voice). According to him, the one who realizes the innate divine instinct can only comprehend the nature of the universe, its relation with man and the nature of the ultimate truth. Emerson's philosophical concepts echo the voices of Vedanthik idealism and mysticism. His philosophical doctrines such as Over-soul, law of compensation and divinity of man have affinity with Vedanthik concepts such as Brahma, karma etc...The similitude between Emerson's philosophy and Advaita Vedanta is a universally acknowledged truth. Undoubtedly, Indian philosophy influenced Emersonian transcendentalism but it is not wise to conclude that Vedanta determined Emerson's philosophy.

The object of this paper is to analyze Emerson's spiritualism under the light of Vedanthik idealism and mysticism. Initially, he was an idealist. His idealism was strongly influenced by Vedanta. Emersonian deity which is defined as the Absolute, all pervasive, all emanating principle resembles the Vedanthik Brahman. This nondualistic idealism not only attracted Emerson as an individual but also the transcendentalist movement as a whole. Emerson strongly confessed his passion for Indian thought and filled his journals with the extracts from Indian scriptures. "The Indian teaching, through its clouds of legends, has yet a simple and grand religion, like a queenly countenance seen through a rich veil. It teaches to speak the truth, love others as you, and to despise trifles. The East is grand, and makes &Europe a land of trifles"(Journals.Vol.VII.Pp.120-30). New England's transcendentalism is purely an idealism which advocates many philosophical concepts that are similar to Upanishadhik doctrines.

Emerson's first essay, *Nature* defined many of the Emersonian philosophical concepts which reflect Vedanthik ideas. The first five chapters of his primary work „Nature“ clearly define Emerson's idealism. In this work, he attempts to present the blend of subjective and objective idealism. The last three chapters of 'Nature' discuss the nature of Emerson's spiritualism. According to Emerson, various elements in the nature reveal divine revelation; hence nature mirrors the divine mind. "Have mountains, and waves, and skies, not significance but what we consciously give them when we employ them as emblems of our thoughts? The world is emblematic" (Works.Vol.I.P.32).

According to Emerson, various elements of the nature are alphabets and God expresses his ideas through the divine script called nature. Emerson is thus expounding a "perfect parallelism between the laws of thought" (Works.Vov.VIII.P.13.). "Every law in nature" he writes, "as gravity, centripetence, repulsion, polarity, undulation, has a counterpart in the intellect" (Works.Vol.III.P.211). Emerson's essay *Nature* defines the phenomenal world as an incarnation of the Over-soul and at the same time describes the nature from Swedenborgian perspective. Emerson refers every empirical object as an apocalypse of the mind. He strongly affirms that every element of the nature reflects a divine design. Emerson's idealism considers God as the real and world as an appearance as well as the spirit as cause and the world as effect. For idealists, phenomenal world is neither real nor unreal. In the essay, he writes: "It is the uniform effect of culture on the human mind, not to shake our faith in the stability of particular phenomena as of heat, Water, azote; but to lead us to regard nature as phenomenon, not substance; to attribute necessary existence to spirit; to esteem nature as an accident and an effect" (Ibid.P.49).

According to Idealism, the ideas are real and the empirical world is unreal. Idealists argue that mind pre-exists to matter, hence it is not the product of the matter. Emerson endorses this view and says "Mind is the only reality, of which men and all other natures are better or worse reflectors" (Ibid P. 33."The Transcendentalist"). In idealistic tone, Emerson claims that the ultimate reality lies behind in a temporal phenomenal world. Emerson considers Vyasa and Berkeley as pioneers of idealism and

admires both the philosophers. According to idealism, that which is temporal, phenomenal and visible is unreal and that which is transient and immutable is eternal. For Vyasa and Berkeley, the empirical objects, nature, art, persons, letters, and religion are parts of transient nature.

Similarly, Emerson writes: Things we now esteem fixed shall, one by one, detach themselves like ripe fruit from our experience, and fall, The landscape, the figures, Boston, London are facts as fugitive as any institution past, or any institution past, or any whiff of mist or smoke, and so is society and so is the world. The soul looketh steadily, forwards, creating a world before her, leaving worlds behind her. She has no dates, nor rites, nor persons, nor specialties, nor men. The soul knoweth only the soul; the web of events is tile flowing robe in which she is clothed. Emerson's „Nature“ clearly projected him as an idealist. According to his philosophy, the ultimate truth is non-dual pure consciousness, existence, and bliss that are not a matter. The ultimate reality manifests itself in various forms and names in the phenomenal world. For both Emerson and Vedanta the ultimate reality is all pervasive and universal principle. Vedanta referred it as Brahma and Emerson named it as Over-soul. Emersonian doctrine of illusion and Vedanthik theory of Maya explain the phenomenal world just as a mere appearance, further remark that there is only one reality and that reality exists in all beings. In Chandokya Upanishad (11.i -4) it is stated: "All product, is mere name... the sense is that there is no real entity in the shape of the product; it exists in name only being based upon words" (The Thirteen Principal Upanishads. P. 190). Vedanta says Brahma is the only real, the individual due to ignorance considers the world as real. The non-dual absolute being is an attribute-less creative principle which exists beyond all limitations. The New England transcendentalism, like Advaita Vedanta, never admits the subject and object distinction. Both expound absolute non-dualism. Upanishad articulates that the absolute non-dual being is inherent in all beings. It is infinite in nature and is beyond all concepts, ideas, doctrines, dogmas, isms and so on. The Mundaka Upanishad (1.i.7) describes: "As a spider emits and draws in (its thread), As herbs arise on the earth, / As the hairs of the head and body from a living person, / So from

the imperishable arises ever reaching here" (ibid, P. 367).

Emerson in his work „Nature“ emphasizes that idealism views the world as the incarnation of God. He condemns Christian theology which rejects God as a material cause and endorses Vedanthik idea which declares God as the material cause of the universe. Emerson and Vedanta strongly believe that all beings emanate from God and finally everything dissolves into him. God in the process of creating the universe transformed himself into it. Hence idealists articulate that nothing exists in the universe except God. Materialists, empiricists, behaviorists and classical physicists who believe in materialism emphasizes that matter is the ultimate reality, which means that reality is conceived as a corporeal mass. Emerson criticizes the materialistic philosophy which disapproves the existence of the cause of all causes and the source of all beings. He opines that a materialist may become an idealist but materialism never wins the heart of an idealist. Spirit is the primary cause and creative principle of this universe but not the matter. According to him the being which exists in all beings is none other than the absolute being, men in all ages and in all cultures persistently striving to discover the indwelling divine instinct. Undoubtedly German idealism, Neo-platonic philosophy, Swedenborgian idealism and Berkeley's idealism influenced Emerson's philosophy but Vedanta played a definite role in giving perfection to Emerson's ontology. Some of the critics argue that Plato's idealism inspired Emerson in formulating his transcendentalism but the fact remains that Plato himself borrowed many ideas from Vedanta.

Thus, Emerson's philosophy can be defined as the blend of Vedanta and Plato's idealism. He learned that Upanishads influenced many of the philosophical concepts of Plato such as complete independence of soul and body, the idea of good, immortality and the concept of fundamental unity. Emerson writes: "The unity of Asia and the detail of Europe; Plato came to join... The excellences of Europe Asia are in his brain"(works, Vol. IV. P.40.Plato). Plato's philosophy directed Emerson to go through Vedanta and strengthened his interest in Orientalism. Emerson didn't view Plato as a pure Orientalist but as the synthesis of "the infinitude of the Asiatic soul" and "the active and mature genius

of Europe". Upanishads lent full support to Emerson's revolt against materialism. Brihadaranyaka Upanishad attracted Emerson's attention and Maitreya's persistent enquiry of the nature of ultimate reality stirred his philosophical quest. The Concord sage after 1845 deeply delved into the translations of Bhagavad Gita. The concept of Stitapragna which Krishna referred in the second chapter of Bhagavad Gita mesmerized Emerson. The materialistic philosophy lies more emphasize on the sense experiences and negates the very existence of ideas. Materialism doesn't admit intuition as the best means to realize the ultimate reality.

Emerson like an idealist defines the matter as a phenomenon. In *Nature* he says "Idealism saith: matter is a phenomenon, not a substance. Idealism acquaints us with the total disparity between the evidence of our own being and the evidence of the world's being, The one is perfect, the other, incapable of my assurance, the mind is a part of the nature of things; world is a divine dream, from which we may presently awake to the glories and certainties of day" (Works. Vol, I, P. 62, "Nature"). These words strongly condemn the idea of materialism which says that knowledge can be derived through sense organs. This ideological distinction between idealism and materialism helped Emerson to define his ontological stand. He writes, "What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us is idealism; Idealism as it appeared" (Ibid, Pp. 329-30, "The Transcendentalist"). He further remarks that ideologically, mankind is divided into two groups: Materialists and Idealists. Materialists uphold experience where as idealists prefer consciousness. For materialists, knowledge can only be gained through sense organs. The idealists argue that sense organs cannot help to penetrate into the very nature of the object. Materialists stand for facts and history, where as idealists insist upon intuition, power of thought and enlightenment of individual.

These two distinctive perspectives are natural. The idealists aim at spiritual enlightenment while the materialists rely upon their sense organs. The idealists emphasize on direct experiences. The materialists define the world as real where as the idealists as appearance. Sankara refers the world as unreal ((Jagat mithya). Emerson who imbibed Advaita Vedanta condemned Lockean materialism. Emerson gradually moved away from subjective

idealism to spiritualism, his spiritualism centers around the spirit which he referred as Over-soul. According to his spiritualism, the world is a manifestation of the Over-soul, Emerson's spiritualism in many respects resembles Advaita Vedanta and Emerson identified himself as a true Vedanthin. These lines from Emerson „Nature“ echo the Vedanthik idea, ": "It suggests the absolute. It is a perpetual effect; it is a great shadow pointing always to the sun behind in" (Works. Vol, I, P. 63. "Nature"). Like Vedanta, he remarks that the absolute being is beyond all attributes; hence it is inexplicable and indefinable but can only be experienced.

Idealism also defines the matter as phenomena but not as a substance. Bhagavad Gita lends full support to Emerson's view when it refers the Brahma as supreme, God within and material cause of the universe. *Aksaram brahma paramam svabhavo dhyatmam veyate bhutabhavodbhavakaro visargah karmsamjnitah* (Bhagavad Geeta, Pp, 452-53 (VII: 3)). For Emerson and Vedanta, the nature and all beings are manifestations of the Brahma or Over-soul. The absolute being is the eternal universal energy which is governing the universe. It is the life force that pervades the whole universe and everything is illuminated by it. Vedanta and Emerson argue that one can experience the Absolute only through intuition. The mind being finite, cannot comprehend the Absolute which is infinite in its nature. Neither logic nor reasons support the individual to realize the ultimate truth. Taitreya Upanishad says that mind cannot comprehend the power by which it is able to think. Kena Upanishad similarly describes as There the eye goes not, speech goes not, nor the mind; we know not, we understand not how one would teach It. Emerson's transcendentalism defines the Over-soul as transcendental serenity; similarly Aurobindo in his work „the life divine“ calls Brahma as transcendental silence. Emerson in Vedanthik tone declares that no one can describe the nature of the Absolute in words. In *Self Reliance*, he gives expression to such a view. For Emerson, like a Vedanthin or a Buddhist, the highest spiritual realization is possible through intuition but not through intellect, and this realization defies communication through words. In the same essay *Self-Reliance*, he further remarks: "And now at last the highest truth on this subject (self-reliance)

remains unsaid; probably cannot be said; for all that we say is the far-off remembering of the intuition” (Works. Vol.11. –Pp. 68-69, "Self Reliance M).

The "Over-Soul", Emerson calls it, "wise silence". Transcendentalism advocates that the one who searches for God in the external world never finds him but one who follows the instructions of the innate divine voice realizes God within. According to transcendentalism, every being is identical with the Over-soul. Upanishads propound the doctrine of Ahambrahmaasmi (I am the absolute), the doctrine of Tattvtnasi (Thou art that), Ayamatma Brahma (The self is Brahma) and Prajnanam Brahma (Brahma is consciousness), all these doctrines establish the fact that man is none other than the Absolute but he is not able to recognize his true self due to ignorance. The ultimate purpose of life is to realize the true self and to rely upon the self, Emerson rightly called it self-reliance. Both transcendentalism and Vedanta strongly believe that all beings emanate from the Absolute, Brahma or Over-soul. Emerson writes "...within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the Universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE” (Works. Vol. 11. P. 269, "The Over-soul).

Emerson expounds the doctrine of infinitude of a private man. According to him, God dwells in every part and particle of this universe; the individual who is finite form of the Absolute fails to recognize his true nature and misidentifies himself with the ego. The individual who acts according to the inner voice can only realize the ultimate truth and identify himself with the Absolute. Sankara and Emerson have similar opinion regarding the oneness of individual soul and universal soul. Everything is lodged into the Over-soul, it contains all and it is inherent in all. The phenomenal world is a manifestation of the Over-soul. Thus Sankara and Emerson transformed their idealism into spiritualism. Idealism argues that reality never exists in the external world while spiritualism guides the individual to discover God within. Emerson says: "The Idealist says, God paints the world around your soul, the spiritualist saith, yea, but God is within you, the self of self Creates the world through you... (Journals. Vol. IV. 78.) Emerson moved from idealism to spiritualism because idealism failed to gratify his spiritual quest. The subjective idealism

which Emerson initially admired couldn't present the nature as a divine scripture through which God reveals himself, hence Emerson felt that the subjective idealism alienated himself from God. Emerson never considers matter as real but like Sankara he attributed soteriological value to the phenomenal world.

Thus Emerson, like Vedanta treats nature as a means to liberation. In his work *Nature* he declares he has no hatred towards nature, he deliberately confesses that his aim is not to blame the nature but to seek solace from it. "I have no hostility to nature" he confesses in "Nature", "but a child's love... I do not wish to fling stones at my beautiful mother nor soil my nest". He emphasizes therapeutic power of nature, he believes it purges individual soul and liberates self from egotism. He writes: "Man's intercourse with heaven and earth becomes part of his daily food, In the presence of nature a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows" (Ibid. P. 9). Vedanta described two types of Brahma: Sadguna and Nirguna Brahma. Brihadaranyaka Upanishad also defines the external world as something which has purposive existence. According to Sankara, the world is neither real nor unreal. For both Emerson and Sankara, the phenomenal world existed with the purpose. According to Vedanta and transcendentalism, the nature is a mediating agency between man and God. Emerson accepted idealism as "highly unique position in its relation to the spiritual reality" (Ralph Waldo Emerson; „The Single Vision”, in American Classics Reconsidered P. 23.). Both Vedanthik and Emersonian approach to reality is one and the same. Like Sankara, Emerson remarks that man can liberate himself from the delusive power of the world when knowledge dawns upon him. Spiritual progress leads to realization of the ultimate truth; liberation is possible only through the process of spiritual purification and realization of the ultimate truth leads to liberation (Moksha).

Conclusion:

In this paper we have clearly demonstrated the parallels between R.W Emerson's idealism and Advaita Vedanta. Vyasa in the history of Indian philosophy expounded objective idealism in the name of Vedanta. Emerson, who initially subscribed to subjective idealism and Berkeleyan objective idealism, later changed his ideology and constructed

his philosophy purely on the lines of strict non-dualism. Thus one can clearly understand Emerson's works under the light of Vedanta.

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