
Orestes Brownson
Excerpts from Review of Emerson's "Divinity School Address"
1838

Orestes A. Brownson (1803–1876), a self-educated Vermonter, rejected Presbyterian Calvinism as a young man in favor of religious liberalism. After serving as a Universalist minister and losing and regaining his faith, Brownson became a Unitarian minister and in 1836 moved to Boston, where he affiliated himself with the Transcendentalists. Within several years, however, he became increasingly conservative, both politically and religiously, and he began to challenge Transcendental individualism. In 1844, he baffled and alienated his former friends by converting to Roman Catholicism. He remained a Catholic for the remainder of his life. In the review excerpted below, of Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Divinity School Address," Brownson raised numerous concerns about Emerson's views on God and on the sources of morality and truth. —D. Voelker

[1] In a moral point of view the leading doctrine of this address, if we have seized it, is not a little objectionable. It is not easy to say what that moral doctrine is; but so far as we can collect it, it is, that the soul possesses certain laws or instincts, obedience to which constitutes its perfection. "The sentiment of virtue is a reverence and delight in the presence of certain divine laws." "The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul." The moral sentiment results from the perception of these laws, and moral character results from conformity to them. Now this is not, we apprehend, psychologically true. If any man will analyze the moral sentiment as a fact of consciousness, he will find it something more than "an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul." He will find that it is a sense of obligation. Man feels himself under obligation to obey a law; not the law of his own soul, a law emanating from his soul as a lawgiver; but a law above his soul, imposed upon him by a supreme lawgiver, who has a right to command his obedience. He does never feel that he is moral in obeying merely the laws of his own nature, but in obeying the command of a power out of him, above him, and independent of him.

[2] By the laws of the soul, we presume, Mr. Emerson means our instincts. In his Phi Beta Kappa Address, reviewed in this journal for January, he speaks much of the instincts, and bids us "plant ourselves on our instincts, and the huge world will come round to us." The ethical rule he lays down is then, "follow thy instincts," or as he expresses it in the address before us, "obey thyself." Now if we render this rule into the language it will assume in practice, we must say, obey thyself,—follow thy instincts,—follow thy inclinations,—live as thou listest. Strike out the idea of something above man to which he is accountable, make him accountable only to himself, and why shall he not live as he listeth? We see not what restraint can legitimately be imposed upon any of his instincts or propensities. There may then be some doubts whether the command, "obey thyself," be an improvement on the Christian command, "deny thyself."

[3] Put the rule, Mr. Emerson lays down, in the best light possible, it proposes nothing higher than our own individual good as the end to be sought. He would tell us to reduce all the jarring elements of our nature to harmony, and produce and maintain perfect order in the soul. Now is this the highest good the reason can conceive? Are all things in the universe to be held

subordinate to the individual soul? Shall a man take himself as the centre of the universe, and say all things are for his use, and count them of value only as they contribute something to his growth or well-being? This were a deification of the soul with a vengeance. It were nothing but a system of transcendental selfishness. It were pure egotism. According to this, I am everything; all else is nothing, at least nothing except what it derives from the fact that it is something to me.

[4] Now this system of pure egotism, seems to us to run through all Mr. Emerson's writings. We meet it everywhere in his masters, Carlyle and Goethe. He and they may not be quite so grossly selfish as were some of the old sensualist philosophers; they may admit a higher good than the mere gratification of the senses, than mere wealth or fame; but the highest good they recognise is an individual good, the realization of order in their own individual souls. Everything by them is estimated according to its power to contribute to this end. If they mingle with men it is to use them; if they are generous and humane, if they labor to do good to others, it is always as a means, never as an end. Always is the *doing*, whatever it be, to terminate in self. Self, the higher self, it is true, is always the centre of gravitation. Now is the man who adopts this moral rule, really a moral man? Does not morality always propose to us an end separate from our own, above our own, and to which our own good is subordinate?

[5] If we rightly comprehend Mr. Emerson's views of God, he admits no God but the laws of the soul's perfection. God is in man, not out of him. He is in the soul as the oak is in the acorn. When man fully developes [sic.] the laws of his nature, realizes the ideal of his nature, he is not, as the Christians would say, god-like, but he is God. The ideal of man's nature is not merely similar in all men, but identical. When all men realize the ideal of their nature, that is, attain to the highest perfection admitted by the laws of their being, then do they all become swallowed up in the One Man. There will then no longer be men; all diversity will be lost in unity, and there will be only One Man, and that one man will be God. But what and where is God now? Before all men have realized the ideal of their nature, and become swallowed up in the One Man, is there really and actually a God? Is there any God but the God Osiris, torn into pieces and scattered up and down through all the earth, which pieces, scattered parts, the weeping Isis must go forth seeking everywhere, and find not without labor and difficulty? Can we be said to have at present anything more than the disjected members of a God, the mere embryo fragments of a God, one day to come forth into the light, to be gathered up that nothing be lost, and finally moulded into one complete and rounded God? So it seems to us, and we confess, therefore, that we can affix no definite meaning to the religious language which Mr. Emerson uses so freely.

Discussion Questions:

1. How did Brownson attack the "moral point of view" of the essay?
2. What objections did Brownson raise to what he took as Emerson's "views of God"?
3. What was the problem, according to Brownson, with Emerson's form of Transcendentalism?

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