

17.037/17.038. American Political Thought
Spring 2004

Reading/Discussion Questions for Week 7. Individualism

Emerson

In “The American Scholar”, Emerson discusses three different influences on the human mind: nature, books, and action. Which influence does he take to be the most important? Why? Emerson stresses that American scholars have the duty “to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances.” How is this to be accomplished?

In “Self-Reliance,” Emerson preaches self-trust (“Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string.”) and attacks imitation and conformity (“envy is ignorance...imitation is suicide...”). What does it mean to trust or rely on oneself? Why is self-reliance so important? Why do men fear self-reliance?

In his essay “Politics,” Emerson writes, “Good men must not obey the laws too well.” This sentence expresses the sentiment found in this and other essays that individuals are likely to be better than the laws, because “every actual state is corrupt.” He concludes, “Hence the less government we have the better—the fewer laws, and the less confided power. The antidote to this abuse of formal government is the influence of private character, the growth of the Individual.” He suggests that the private moral sentiments of individuals is likely to be better than the laws themselves, which are the product of competition and compromise. Do you agree with Emerson’s view that laws should only be obeyed uneasily? Why or why not?

In his essay “The Fugitive Slave Law,” Emerson claims that “an immoral law cannot be valid.” On what grounds does he make this claim? Do you agree?

Thoreau

In his chapter “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For” in *Walden*, Thoreau explains his simple life in the woods: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life...I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life.” He contrasts his life at Walden Pond with the life of the nation, which is “just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim...” (86-87). In contrasting these two different ways of life, he distinguishes between what *is* and what *appears* to be. Like Emerson, Thoreau is motivated by a worry that the people do not see clearly that all social conventions are, in fact, conventions, i.e. artificial and hence, changeable. Why do they think this point is so important to recognize?

In “Civil Disobedience,” Thoreau advocates that citizens disobey unjust laws and policies. He himself refused to pay his taxes to protest laws which supported slavery and war with Mexico. How does he justify such disobedience?

Stanton

One reason (the strongest, in her view) Stanton provides in arguing for equal rights for women has to do with women’s independence and self-reliance. Why is fostering self-reliance among women so important? How is self-reliance among women to be achieved?

General

What is the relationship between democratic government and culture, on the one hand, and the individual, on the other, suggested by the writings of Emerson, Thoreau, and Stanton?