

Ideal individualism and the benefits of conformity



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In *Self-Reliance*, Ralph Waldo Emerson describes his vision of the individual, a man dependent on himself and refusing to conform to social standards and expectations. The individual, according to Emerson, stands alone against the wave of society, listening to his own heart and disregarding the thoughts of others. He dismisses any inter-personal connection that holds humanity together in families, friendships, and nations, arguing that man's only true support is himself. The true individual will follow his own path, and not look into the past or to other people for help; he will be a monument to himself and exclude any ideas that are not his own. Emerson envisions this individual as an ideal man, but any man that truly follows his advice will suffer extreme consequences, as would society as a whole. Each of Emerson's most valued qualities in individuals go against human nature, forcing people to leave their comfortable lives and embark on an arduous journey for little or no apparent reward. Although Emerson valiantly argues on behalf of individualism, his arguments instead create a compelling reason to conform to the dictates of society. According to Emerson, the individual must by definition stand alone against society, but he fails to explain why individualism is enough of a reason to face the scorn of society. Emerson states, "Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist", illustrating that any person who wants to become a real human as well as an individual must rebel against the societal structure. America, as the land of diversity and promise, glorifies the 'individual', and praises those select few who can follow their own path, but in reality very few people ever choose to step away from society because, as Emerson admits, "for nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure". Humans, as social creatures, are driven by their very natures to seek out reassurance from other humans, and

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social status plays important physiological and psychological roles in each individual, so by placing an individual in a lower social position, Emerson is dooming all individuals to unhealthy and unsatisfying lives. The disadvantages of nonconformity are apparent, since the majority of people dislike individuals who do not fit into the organization of society, but the advantages do not appear as readily. Emerson, when explaining the greater value of the individual, argues, “ it is only as a man puts off all foreign support and stands alone that I see him to be strong... Is not a man better than a town?” Modern America embraces the idea of community, and provides many areas of life where the individual alone would have no ability to succeed better than a group of individuals. Although men can be independent, they must also depend on each other for essential human functioning in contrast to Emerson’s ideal and isolated individual. While human love and the bonds between families and friends are central to the lives of most people, Emerson argues that all such ties to other people must be reduced in order to become an individual. While he does not entirely dismiss other humans, he de-emphasizes their importance. He explains, “ I shall endeavour to nourish my parents, to support my family, to be the chaste husband of one wife but these relations I must fill after a new and unprecedented way”, arguing that his own needs and desires must take precedence over his relationships with others. Without secure ties to family, people lose a great deal of comfort and reassurance, and most people could not part with the love of others in order to stand alone. Emerson believes that all emotion is subordinate to the Truth, and therefore “ truth is handsomer than the affectation of love”. In order to become an individual, one must place truth above comfort and love, but giving up these emotions

is not an easy task. In all cultures, in all time periods, bonds have developed to tie individuals together into families; bonds of marriage, of mother, of father, and of child, almost always based on love, or at least a pretense of love. Love is often paired with hope, and provides a counter-balance to the loneliness and despair that fill the human experience, and by stripping humans of their ability to enjoy and be comforted by mutual affection, Emerson is arguing that true individuals cannot truly participate in humanity. Although Emerson might be able to “shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls me”, the very thought strikes at the root of human emotion, for familial ties are the deepest and strongest connections that humans enjoy. By placing himself as more important than his relationships to others, he is revealing a selfish motive and a compelling reason why individualism should not be embraced; the path to individualism is lonely, and can never share the warmth of another human. By Emerson’s logic, becoming a nonconformist results in losing one’s ability to affect change in the world, because only with knowledge of the past can the future be advanced. Emerson emphasizes, “insist on yourself; never imitate”, showing his absolute belief in the importance of the individual over all others. He disregards the evidence of others in the past, and believes that men should not use the knowledge of others, but rather discover truths themselves. “Shakespeare will never be made by the study of Shakespeare”, Emerson claims, thus showing that the study of older thoughts and works cannot bring about enlightenment. Without access to older forms of knowledge or philosophy, however, humankind is reduced to a pitiful existence, without any form of art or comfort. Language is often cited as a distinctly human ability, and one of the primary reasons for its success

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was the continuance of ideas that it ensured. Rather than having to make the same mistakes every generation, language allowed individuals to pass on knowledge to the next generation, and with each generation so furthered, humanity took another step away from primitive existence. In addition, he viewed new technology as helping to cripple mankind, for “ his [man’s] notebooks impair his memory; his libraries overload his wit; the insurance-office increases the number of accidents”. In recent years, however, advances in technology have increased the knowledge available to man and helped develop new theories. All of the modern sciences, from biology to physics, depend on new technology, and the sharing of ideas has led to new developments and theories. According to Emerson, “ it will happen for a time that the pupil will find his intellectual power has grown by the study of his master’s mind”, but the pupil will fail to continue to learn. Emerson often gives Plato as a source of wisdom, commending his works and his genius, but almost all of Plato’s early works were dependent on his mentor, Socrates, and even in his later works Plato uses Socrates as his mouthpiece, a clear example of a pupil using and expanding upon the knowledge of his elders. An Emersonian individual, deprived of the knowledge of his forefathers, could not discover theories that advanced the species as a whole, because in order to achieve new heights, one must stand on the shoulders of others; the individual would be too concerned with the simple problems already solved to create any revolutionary techniques or thoughts. While Emerson promotes individualism, telling people to become nonconformists, throw off relationships, and ignore the knowledge of the ages, his own advice would create utter chaos if carried out, and the extent to which his individual opposes human nature provides a persuasive reason to join with the majority

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and refuse to individualize. Humankind is designed by nature to cooperate and interact, and forcing an individual to separate from society and face the scorn of a united majority deprives him of any sense of belonging and happiness. Further severing the ties to community, Emerson denounces family, placing genius and truth above simple inter-personal bonds. Finally, Emerson seeks to continue to isolate potential individuals by cutting them out of time and denying them the history and information provided by the past. In Emerson's eyes, an individual stands alone, unsupported by community, family, and history, but without such supports, any man is doomed to failure, because of the interconnected nature of men. A world of individuals would then be composed of isolated men, each moving to their own rhythm, a world without order or justice, each man's inner truth being his sole guiding force. Reality shows that such complete independence is doomed to fail, for in societies that ignore the conditions of other humans, any one person could easily dominate and subjugate any other people without fear of a coordinated uprising. Humanity would be stripped of its strength and divided, unable to defend against any attack and unable to remain in a state of peace as different individual's paths cross and intersect. Given that Emerson's individualism leads to a Hobbesian state of nature, each man above the judgment of others and so free to act according to any of his desires, individualism loses its appeal, and group conformity seems a small price to pay to prevent such a world. Emerson praises individualism, but when his arguments are closely examined, they demonstrate the weakness of acting alone and encourage people to lose rather than seek individuality.