

Abstract

Background:

In my studies of English literature, I have developed an affinity for Ralph Waldo Emerson's works, which, though not Christian, offer moral views that are more similar to Christian teaching than is typically recognized.

Methods:

I analyzed ethical claims made in the *Divinity School Address* and divided them according to the moral system they seemed to support (relativist vs. objectivist). Then, I studied some of Emerson's influences in an attempt to find greater insight surrounding the *Address*' position.

Results:

In my analysis of the *Address*' ethical claims, there seemed to be many in support of both perspectives at first. However, upon closer study, it became clear that Emerson's seemingly subjectivist statements were not altogether in conflict with his objectivist statements. This was further confirmed through an analysis of Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy, which has significant overlap with that which is laid out in the *Address*.

Conclusion:

The *Divinity School Address* does not lay out a subjectivist position of morality; rather, it firmly asserts the existence of an objective moral law. How can this be reconciled with Emersonian emphases of the individual and his intuition? In the *Address*, intuition does not define morality, thereby making it arbitrary; rather, the *Address* asserts that intuition is the faculty through which objective morality is best observed. This is reflected by Kant, who views *à priori* intuitions as the clearest ways to deduce the moral law.

Introduction

When I first learned about Transcendentalist philosophy, I understood it as a reaction against the cold impersonality of Rationalism and Empiricism. Thus, where an Empiricist would say that truth lies in sense data alone, a Transcendentalist would say that truth exists more purely in one's whims and fancies. Naturally, this seemed to me a relativistic assertion, especially when entering the domain of ethics. However, despite this apparent "anything goes" take on morality, I found myself taking a great liking to Transcendentalist works as I started to read them. As I read works by Emerson in particular, though I certainly saw elements of subjectivity in his moral philosophy, it seemed increasingly difficult to say that his philosophy was left to the individual to decide for himself; there seemed to even be an assertion that morality was objective.

Last semester, I studied a few of Emerson's works in depth, including his *Divinity School Address*. This speech was infamous in its day for its blatant rejection of any form of organized church institution, its rejection of Christ's divinity, and its emphasis of an individual's reliance on his intuitions and sentiments. Surely, if Emerson were a moral subjectivist, he would make it evident in this work.

Thus, I began my study with this question: **Does the *Divinity School Address* assert moral relativism?**

Moral Subjectivity in *D.S.A.*

Emphasis of intuition:

- "The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight to the perfection of the laws of the soul" (Emerson 115).
- "That which shows God out[side] of me, makes me a wart and a wen. There is no longer a necessary reason for my being" (115).
- "The test of the true faith, certainly, should be its power to charm and command the soul" (118).
- "Let me admonish you, first of all, to go alone; refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and to dare to love God without mediator or veil (123).

(See "*Intuition in Kant*" to see how these do not imply a position of moral relativism)

Moral Objectivity in *D.S.A.*

1. Existence of an Objective Moral Law

- "The sentiment of virtue is a reverence and delight in the presence of certain divine laws" (Emerson 108).

2. Absoluteness of the Moral Law

- "The [moral] laws execute themselves. They are out of time, out of space, and not subject to circumstance" (109).

3. Universality of Moral Knowledge

- "The sublime creed [is] that the world is not the product of manifold power, but of one will, of one mind; and that mind is everywhere active" (110).
- "Man fallen into superstition, into sensuality, is never quite without the moral sentiment" (111).

(See "*Kantian Ethical Assertions in D.S.A.*" to see how these concepts are mirrored in Kant)

How Can Both Be the Case?

There are plenty of instances where the *Divinity School Address* asserts that subjective means of interpretation (i.e.: intuition and experience) will lead one to morality. However, it never asserts that morality itself is subjective or arbitrary; in fact, it asserts quite the opposite.

In order to reconcile these two sides of Emerson's philosophy, it is necessary to go to one of his influences, Immanuel Kant, who makes similar assertions, and develops a more in-depth system of ethics.

Kantian Ethics

Kant famously argued in favor of the existence of an objective moral standard, which he said could be deduced by logic. Through his system of imperatives, one can deduce what he "ought" to do in certain situations. Imperatives are hypothetical when they are used to reach a certain end; Kant asserts that these imperatives are not ethical, but merely practical. However, when an imperative is necessary without being necessitated by an end to be met, it is categorical; Kant asserts that the objective moral law is comprised of categorical imperatives, which exist *à priori* (or, prior to human experience).

(Continued below)

Kantian Ethical Assertions in *D.S.A.*

With these assertions, Kant outlines a system akin to that in the *Divinity School Address*:

Emersonian Assertion: Existence of an Objective Moral Law → Kantian Equivalent: Categorical Imperatives

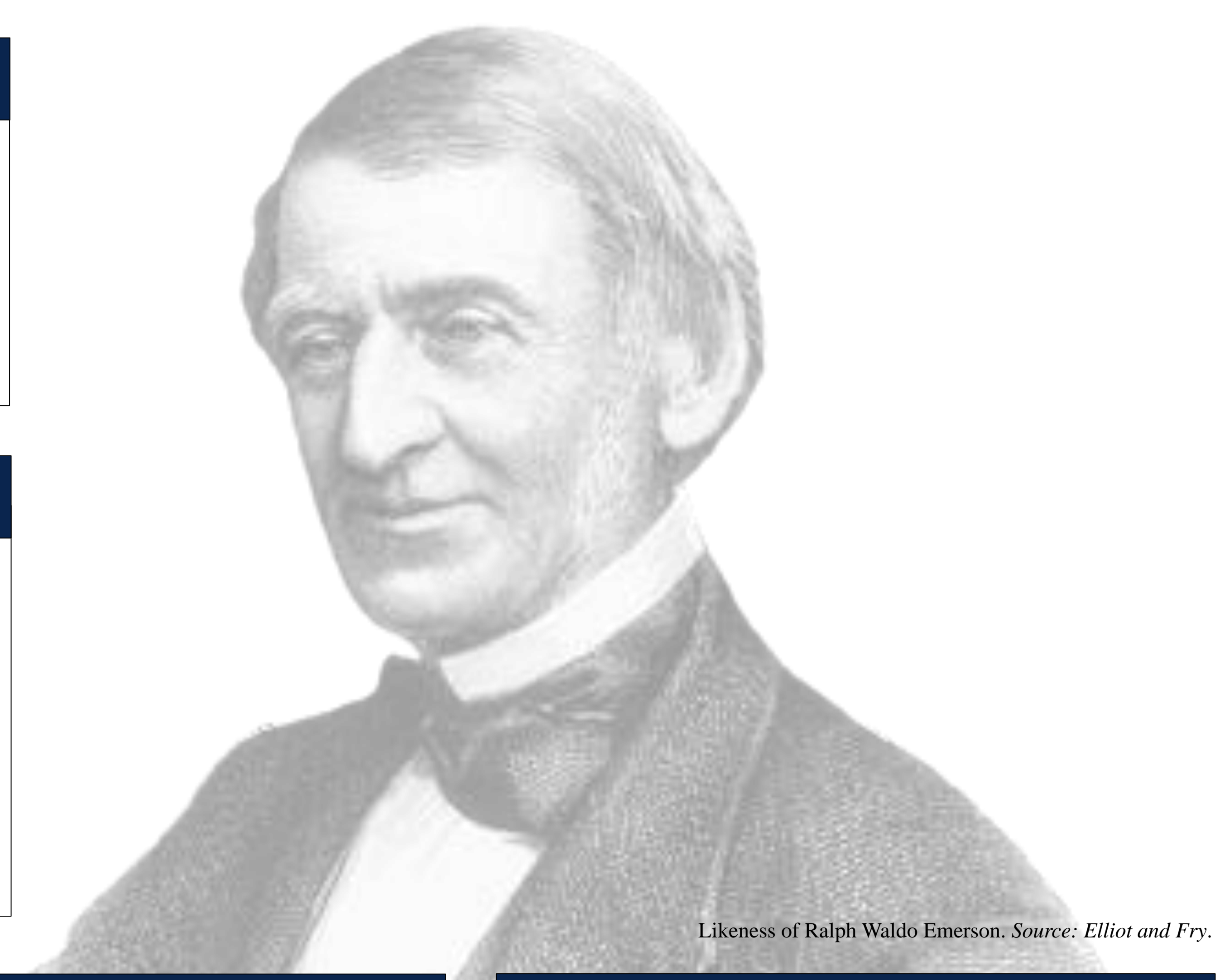
- "The categorical imperative would be that which represented an action as necessary of itself without reference to another end, i.e., as objectively necessary" (Kant, Immanuel. *Fundamental* 42).
- "All maxims, in fact, have... a form, consisting in universality... the maxims must be so chosen as if they were to serve as universal laws of nature" (65).

Emersonian assertion: Absoluteness of the Moral Law → Kantian Equivalent: Obligation

- "Everyone must admit that if a law is to have moral force. i.e., to the basis of an obligation, it must carry with it absolute necessity" (11).
- "The categorical imperative... is not limited by any condition, and as being absolutely, though practically, necessary, may be quite properly called a command" (44).

Emersonian Assertion: Universality of Moral Knowledge → Kantian Equivalent: *À Priori* Intuitions

- "When applied to man, [the moral faculty] does not borrow the least thing from the knowledge of man himself, but gives laws *à priori* to him as a rational being" (2).
- "For that such a[n] *à priori* moral] philosophy must be possible is evident from the common idea of duty and of the moral laws" (11).



Likeness of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Source: Elliot and Fry.

Intuition in Kant

Just as Emerson places intuition as the chief arbiter of man's moral knowledge, Kant ascribes a similar importance to its role in his ethical system. Kant describes intuition thusly:

Intuition is an objective perception (see *Figure 1*):

- "An objective perception is a cognition. The latter is either an intuition or a concept. The former is immediately related to the object and is singular" (Kant, *Critique* 398-9).

Intuition is an *à priori* faculty:

- "This pure [meaning *à priori*] intuition is nothing but the mere form of sensibility, which precedes the actual appearance of objects, since it in fact first makes this appearance possible" (*Prolegomena* 35).

Intuition is necessary to perceive abstract concepts (like morality):

- "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind. It is thus just as necessary to make the mind's concepts sensible (i.e., to add an object to them in intuition) as it is to make its intuitions understandable (i.e., to bring them under concepts)" (*Critique* 193-4).

Thus, if the moral law is objective and abstract, and intuition is necessary to perceive the abstract, intuition is necessary to perceive the moral law.

It seems here that Emerson has adopted Kant's emphasis of intuition in perceiving morality. If this is the case, it is not likely that Emerson holds a relativistic view of morality, as that would go against Kant's assertions. As shown here, **an emphasis of intuition does not necessarily imply moral relativism.**

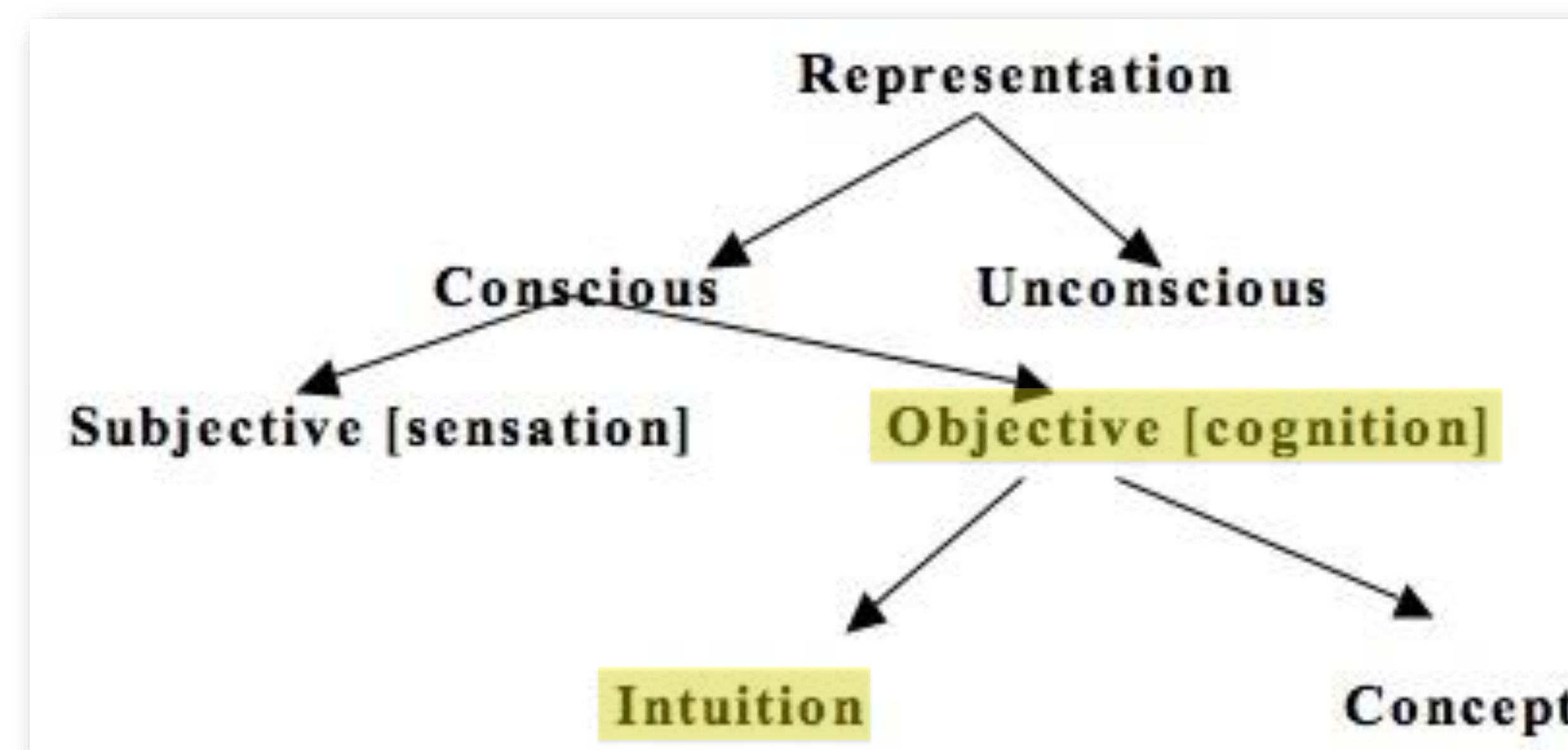


Figure 1. A diagram outlining Kant's various categories of perception. Note his classification of intuition as an objective cognition. Source: *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.



Likeness of Immanuel Kant. Source: Schmidt.

Conclusions

Through an analysis of the *Divinity School Address*' ethical assertions, it is clear that a completely relativistic view of morality is incompatible with Emerson's philosophy, as he appeals many times to a moral law that is objective, universal and unchanging. However, he still asserts conventionally subjective faculties to be fitting for yielding truth, such as intuition. In order to reconcile this apparent conflict, it was necessary to look to Kant, one of Emerson's influences.

Kant lays out assertions that mirror Emerson's (of morality's objectivity, universality and immutability). He also asserts *à priori* intuition (or, the intuitions within the human mind that exist prior to experience) to be a faculty which objectively interprets the objective moral law.

Therefore, taking this into consideration, it is reasonable to conclude in this manner:

- **Emerson, in his *Divinity School Address*, does not assert that one's ethics are dependent on his intuition.**
- **Rather, he asserts that intuition is man's faculty best disposed to revealing the objective moral law.**
- **Thus, the *Address* asserts that morality is objective.**

Implications and Future Work

Implications:

1. There has been a misinterpretation (or misclassification) of Emerson's ethical philosophy as relativistic.
2. This could imply a broader misunderstanding of Transcendentalist ethical philosophy.

Future Work

1. Apply a similar research design to other works of Emerson, such as *Self-Reliance* or *The Over-Soul*.
2. Study ethical philosophies of other Transcendentalists, such as Thoreau and Fuller, to see if this misclassification spans the period as a whole.
3. The influence of Hindu mystics on Emerson's philosophy.

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