

Objective Morality in Emerson's
Divinity School Address

By Nicholas Moyer

Background

- Emerson pioneered the Transcendentalist movement
- Many associate Transcendentalism with moral relativism
- The *Divinity School Address* is often used as an example to justify this belief



E.Q.: Does the
Divinity School
Address assert moral
relativism?

Design

- Read the *Address* and deduce its moral assertions
- Read works by Emerson's influences to determine his presuppositions
- Conclude based on findings

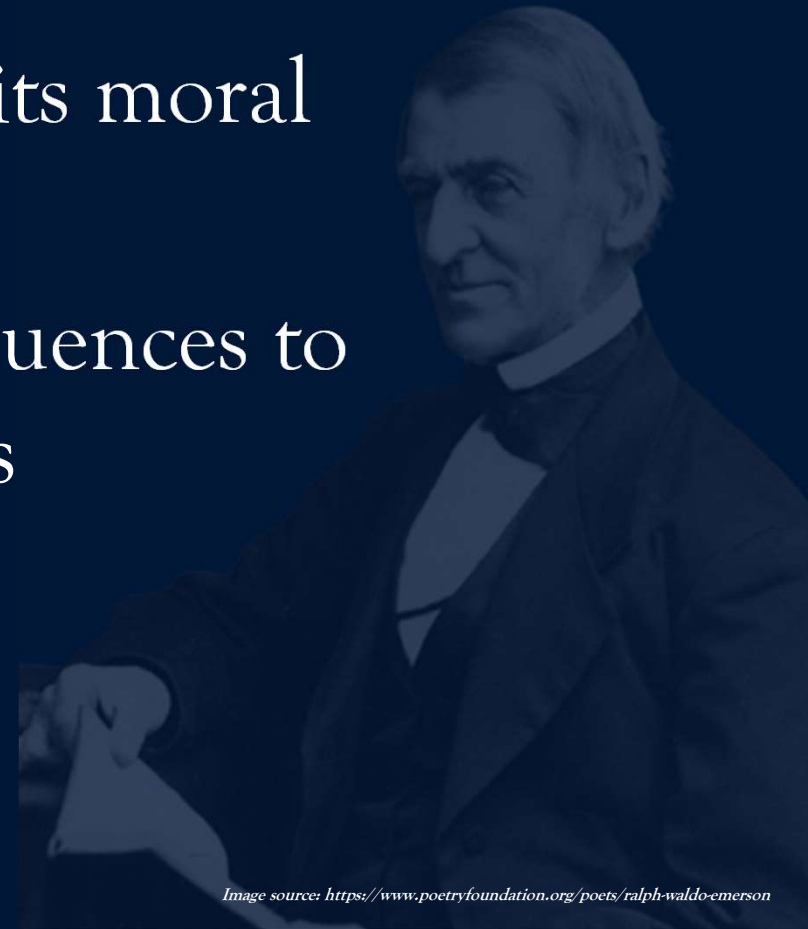


Image source: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ralph-waldo-emerson>

Moral Subjectivity in *The Address*: Intuition

- “The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul” (109).
- “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; to 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).
- “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).

Moral Objectivity in the *Address*

- Existence of an Objective Moral Law
 - “The sentiment of virtue is a reverence and delight in the presence of certain divine laws” (108).
- Absoluteness of the Moral Law
 - “The [moral] laws execute themselves. They are out of time, out of space, and not subject to circumstance” (109).
- Universality of Moral Knowledge
 - “Man fallen into superstition, into sensuality, is never quite without the moral sentiment” (111).

*How can both
be the case?*



Image source: <https://www.thoughtco.com/biography-of-ralph-waldo-emerson-4776020>

Kant's Influence on Emerson

- Categorical Imperatives
 - Existence of Objective Moral Law
- Obligation
 - Absoluteness of the Moral Law
- *À Priori* Intuitions
 - Universality of moral knowledge

Kantian Intuition

- Intuition is an objective perception
- Intuition is an À Priori faculty
- Intuition is necessary to perceive abstract concepts

How Can Both be the Case?

- The Assertion...
 - Is NOT that ethics are dependent on one's intuition (moral relativism)
 - IS that intuition is man's faculty best disposed to revealing the objective Truth (including ethics)
- **Conclusion: Emerson presupposes objective morality.**

Implications

- Possible misinterpretation of Transcendentalist ethics
- May necessitate further research into other works

Bibliography

- Downard, Jeffery. "Emerson's Experimental Ethics and Kant's Analysis of Beauty." *Transactions of the Charles S. Pierce Society*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2003, pp. 87-112. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40321059.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *An Address Delivered Before the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge. Nature and Selected Essays*. Edited by Larzer Ziff, Penguin, 2003, pp. 107-27.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge UP, 1998.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*. Edited by T. K. Abbot, Prometheus, 1988.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. Edited by Gary Hatfield, Cambridge UP, 2004.