

# The Ethical Study of Emerson's Thoughts and Its Impact on "American Dream"

Qinglong Gao

**Abstract**—Emerson's Ethical thoughts can be divided into four parts. First, his ethical thoughts start with his transcendental thoughts of nature which include the spiritual value of nature and a new relationship between human beings and nature. Then, Emerson goes further from the nature to the arts and literature which can influence the human's soul. He advocates using the nature as an intermediary for the human soul to explore the nature and the truth and highlights the importance of oversoul. For the next step, he tries to put the thoughts into practice and solve the social problem. Returning to nature and living a simple life can make a person be self-reliant and well being. At last, to cultivate a new talented generation, he emphasizes the importance of education to promote the individual perfection. All of Emerson's ethical thoughts construct an important ideological foundation and spiritual support to the formation of the core values of the United States --- "American Dream", and give birth to the budding of Environmental Ethics.

**Keywords**—Emerson, Ethical Study, American Dream

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE famous American thinker, writer and social activist --- Ralph Emerson, the leader of New England Transcendentalism movement, is considered one of America's greatest figures in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and gets a lot of reputation. This liberation movement, rising from the New England area then quickly spreading to the entire America, is a real ideological emancipation and cultural liberation movement, and was later known as the American Renaissance. Emerson expressed his Transcendentalism thoughts to the American and European people vividly by spirited speeches with passion, which had a significant impact on the spirits of people in the United States and Europe, and provided a solid foundation to the spread of his transcendentalist ideology through the United States and even the Europe. Until now, works of Emerson have been published in various forms in different countries. As the spiritual food for people around the world, his transcendentalist ideology has inspired generations from different countries, allowing people to find the natural tranquil, spiritual forces and peace of mind in his works.

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## II. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Looking through all the works of Emerson, American transcendentalism philosophy led by Emerson contains a rich and profound ethical thought. Professor Yuqiao Xiang believes that Emerson and Thoreau are the most important representatives of American Transcendentalist Ethical thoughts.[1] American historian Gabriel R. H. also says that: "The core concern of them (Emerson and Thoreau ) is the ethical problem. Their main responsibilities at that time were to put morality into use on Earth." [2] As the leader of the Transcendentalist thought, Emerson held a calm mind over the industrialization process in America in 19<sup>th</sup> century. He was keenly aware of the drawbacks of Americans' desperate pursuit of material wealth, and lashed deism and materialism thoughts wide disseminated in Age of Reason from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, so that to raise Americans' awareness of the importance of the exalted spiritual life. He constructed a transcendental philosophy, and made it a dominant thought in New England and throughout the United States.

### A. Theoretical Significance

Because Emerson's Transcendentalist thoughts are directly related to human morality and spiritual strength, the study should be put on the ethical review, except for the traditional study on the history of American literature and the development of American culture. Emerson's Transcendentalist ideas essentially convey a moral guideline to the American, a range of criterion of life leading the American to realize the spiritual independence, a spiritual guide leading the American to reach a sublime harmony with efforts, and an "American Dream" continually being supplemented and improved which encourages generations of the American to work hard and make progress.

i. Emerson's Transcendentalism Ethics provides an important ideological foundation and spiritual support to the formation of the core values of the United States --- "American Dream".

The seed of "American Dream" germinated from the Dreams of finding the Brave New World that more than a hundred Puritans in the "Mayflower" had. When they came to this new world without religious persecution and modern civilization after the arduous journey, the seed was provided a fertile soil. In the following period that America under the British colonial

rule, the values of "American Dream" developed quietly and provided power for the American people fighting against the colonial rule and eventually won the national independence. Since the US was increasingly powerful after its national independence, and the land area has also been expanding, the connotation of "American Dream" has undergone new changes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

One of America's founding fathers, Benjamin •Franklin, is the material basis of "American dream". He stressed the importance of personal struggle, and combined the God-centered principles of Puritanism and the secular ideology of individualism with the emphasis on personal struggle. Namely, he put the religious spirit and material desires of the early settlers together. He portrayed his life experience as the reflection of "American Dream". Under the guidance of the Franklin case, the American people continued to sum up experience and learnt from his success. They improved their values, and formed the American ethos with the core of pragmatism and individualism.

Emerson's Transcendentalism preaches that God is everywhere in nature, everyone's heart may have the "over-soul" to recognize and acknowledge nature, and everyone can communicate directly with nature and God through the "over-soul", so human beings are sacred. Emerson emphasized that the true scholar, the true Americans should think and criticize independently all the time, and have independent thought without blindly following others. Emerson stressed the sacred personal spiritual thoughts and the values of independence and self-improvement of the individual constructed the spiritual pillar of "American dream".

Therefore, Emerson's Transcendentalism transcends the time and place with a sense of immortal. Research and presentation the ethical significance of Emerson's ideas and thoughts can provide great reference for the formation and realization of "China Dream" and the provisions of its scientific connotation of China today.

ii. Emerson's Transcendentalism Ethics provides an important ideological origin for natural protection.

Emerson's Transcendentalism Ethics views nature at the first place and starts with his transcendentalist view of nature. It provides a new relationship between man and nature, and the basis for thought of environmental ethics which is dedicated to improve the relationship between man and nature.

Emerson brought transcendentalist view of nature to the American people, which is a new understanding of the relationship between man and nature. He warmly inspired all the people to love nature and enjoy the beauty of nature. Thoreau was the practitioner of Environmental Ethics after Emerson. Romantic writer Whitman was governed by the direct influence of Emerson's works and ideas. Environmental Ethics pioneers of the United States--- John • Moore, Leopold, Rachel Carson and Ralston, all considered Emerson as a philosophical basis. In this sense, Emerson is the founder of American Environmental Ethics Thoughts, and provided

advocacy thought of supporting for the protection of nature at the time and later.

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### *B. Practical Significance*

The ethical review of Emerson analyzes the significance of his thoughts for American society and the American people at his time, which can help the modern society and people of our time to get out of the greatest existence problem.

Today's modern industrialization plundered nature, publicize the powerful subject excessively, resulting in loss and weakening of the value of human rationality and our spiritual homeland, arousing the great tensions between man and nature. In the 19th century, the United States has experienced the same ecological crisis and the crisis of survive of mankind. Therefore, Emerson rethought the relationship between man and nature, and advocated to enhance people's spiritual world and return to nature to solve all the problems, so as to achieve the moral perfection. Emerson called on people to return to nature, the spiritual home of truth, goodness and beauty. Therefore, we must learn from Emerson's thoughts of nature and morality, so that people can return to nature, which makes perfect harmony with nature in spirit.

### III. EMERSON'S TRANSCENDENTALISM THOUGHTS OF NATURE

Through the ethical review of Emerson's thoughts, we found that the "nature" occupied a major position in Emerson's Transcendentalist thoughts. He believes that nature can give spiritual enlightenment to humans; natural beauty that unfettered was unreservedly catered to all human beings, meanwhile, human beings can understand the higher moral law or the spirit of the law from nature when freely feeling and appreciating nature; nature shows the beautiful diversity and the eternal moral laws to humans and the human nature is fully consistent with the real nature; for all humans, the best experience of human is the blending of humanity with nature. From the perspective of Transcendentalism, everything in nature is ethical and sacred.

In addition to the useful values nature exhibiting to humans, the more important is to find the intrinsic value of nature, especially nature's function of moral education to humans and the spiritual value of a harmonious unity between human and nature through the combing of human's spirit and "oversoul" (God). Emerson's reverence appreciation and love for nature constitute his most original Environmental Ethical thoughts. He explained his Transcendentalism view of nature from the relationship between nature and spirit, and this new relationship between man and nature is an important part and the developing foundation of Transcendentalism Ethics.

#### IV. THE COMBINATION OF NATURE AND OVERSOUL---EMERSON'S ETHICAL THOUGHTS OF ARTS AND LITERATURE

Starting from the Transcendentalism view of nature, Emerson's thought considers the nature, God and man as a continuously cycling and indivisible whole. In this organic whole, God is expressed as "oversoul", and the human spirit evolves to the highlights of "oversoul" and is consistent to "oversoul" because of its divine nature; nature, a symbol of the human spirit, is the perfect intermediary communicating "oversoul" and the human spirit. When nature, super spirit, and man organically complete the communication and integration at the level of human spirit and build a harmonious whole, the perfection world of the unity of truth, goodness and beauty also embraces the humans. The expression by words of the perfection world constitutes the best art and literature of humans. Because the expression of the human soul will have a direct influence to its viewer's mind, it causes the resonance of two souls. Therefore, literature and art is one of the expression methods of "oversoul", and has played an important role in the washing and purification to the human soul. Poets, nature-based, with the combination of oversoul and nature and allowing nature to enter the human mind by oversoul, reveal their individuality and creativity of the soul by the inspiration from literary and artistic works, and play the function of moralization on humans.

#### V. RETURNING BACK TO NATURE---EMERSON'S ETHICAL THOUGHTS OF LIFESTYLE

In order to apply the theoretical Transcendentalism into the practice of human life, American scholars dominated by Emerson, based on the ideological foundation of Transcendentalism view of nature, criticized the burgeoning of Consumerism, viewed nature as the spiritual home of mankind and advocated the practice of a kind of life style returning to nature.

He was convinced that human beings use science and technology in order to achieve the full advantage of the natural values. With the progress of science and technology, people eventually can realize the ultimate goal of nature, which inevitably accompanied by a corresponding moral progress.

After the in-depth thinking of scientific and technological progress and human wealth, Emerson found that the human has lost the direct practice of life because of the convenience provided by science and technology. Emerson deeply worried about that the business overall attacked on the society and the disappearance of people's human nature itself caught up in the vicious circle of consumerism. He used his Transcendentalism ethical thought to influence people's hearts, so that all of humanity can be optimistic about the awareness of the importance of personal ability. He also argued that all humans should return back to nature, so that to have a better world.

To advocate the returning to nature, he emphasized the role of manual labor. Then, he personally practiced a return to

natural life, never making extravagant consumption. The sources and strength of all his thoughts are among his simple life in nature. Finally, the simple life returning to the nature is to make people go deeply into the real beauty of nature.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

Facing today's human survival and environmental crises, it only has a very limited and shallow effectiveness and impact just starting from the mandatory provisions of the law to stipulate human's survival consciousness and environmental awareness, therefore, it is essential to starting from an ethical point of view to subtly change human's behaviors and cultural values from the mind and spirit, ultimately achieve the moral perfection of individuals and the improvement of community values. Back in the times of Emerson, this crisis had emerged, his Transcendentalism view of nature, the literary and artistic outlook combining "oversouls" with nature, the lifestyle concepts of returning to nature and the education concepts focusing on individual perfection were good cure for the treatment of this social crisis, and gave birth to the budding of Environmental Ethics. It has a very important significance to summarize, interpret, and study in-depth the ethical significance of Emerson's thoughts for today's promoting of environmental ethics theory research and practical environmental protection, and the reconstruction of consumption ethics and education ethics.

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