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**Frederic Henry Hedge**  
**Excerpts from 'Writings of R. W. Emerson' (1845)**

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*Frederic Henry Hedge (1805 –1890) was a Unitarian minister and one of the founding members of the Transcendental Club. In his 1845 review of Emerson's Essays: Second Series, Hedge praises Emerson's work while still acknowledging the latter's unorthodox views. Hedge's constructive and latitudinarian attitude is a model of Christian charity and magnanimity. – J. S. Uebersax*

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From 'Writings of R. W. Emerson', *Christian Examiner*, Jan. 1845, 87-106.

[1] Another volume of Essays from R. W. Emerson is a literary benefaction which we acknowledge with unfeigned gratitude. We congratulate the lovers of sprightly and profound discourse on this fresh extract from the mental life of a most loving and sincere spirit; for such, in spite of his heresies, and sins against custom and tradition, all who know him well must acknowledge him to be. Were it only for the rarity of such spirits and such books, we could hardly desire a more valuable accession to the national literature, or the world's literature, than these pages.

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[2] What pleases us best in this chapter ['Experience'], is the strong emphasis which it gives to the present momentary life. This is not an article peculiar to the Emersonian philosophy. It is one, perhaps the only one, in which all philosophies unite. The "carpe diem" of the Epicurean is, in one sense or another, the conclusion of each. Materialist and Idealist, Stoic and Epicurean, all preach to this effect. "Life is long and rich," says Seneca, "to those who know how to use it." "In this present that God hath made us," says Montaigne, "there is nothing unworthy our care. By how much the possession of life is more short, I must take deeper and fuller hold of it. It is absolute and as it were a divine perfection, for a man to know how to enjoy his being as he ought." But we have met with no statement of this doctrine so adequate to our conception of it, as Mr. Emerson's in this essay.

"To finish the moment, to find the journey's end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom. Five minutes of to-day are worth as much to me as five minutes in the next millennium. Let us be poised and wise and our own to-day. I settle myself ever firmer in the creed that we should not postpone and refer and wish, but do broad justice where we are."

This is the top and sum of all ethics, of all religion. This is the "everlasting life" of the Christian Scriptures; — to possess and subject the present; to fill, with all the fulness of our being, the passing hour.

[3] It is too much the fashion with good people, and is thought to be the genuine language of piety, to flout and degrade the present life, to speak disparagingly of this world, to call it a vale of tears, a state of sin and sorrow, scarce worthy a single thought or care from a rational and immortal being. How large a portion of the hymns employed in the religious worship, even of our own Connexion, are surcharged with this sentiment! The doctrine of a life to come has been so handled as to throw, not light, but a shadow on the life that now is. We doubt, more harm than good is done by such representations. Harm is done by every thing which tends to beget indifference to the present, and to disgust us with the actual conditions of our being. On this account, the frequent use of that metaphor, so beloved by the preachers of religion,

which likens life to a pilgrimage, has seemed to us of doubtful expediency. Beautiful and appropriate as it was in its original, Scriptural application, the inordinate expansion of it in the popular theology has served to throw a sad and false coloring over the being of man, and to cherish a weakly, puling sentimentality, incompatible with a healthy and vigorous life. A heavy day's journey through a tedious, barren land, with a comfortable inn at the end of it;—is the translation of this metaphor, as it lies in the common apprehension. It is time the popular theology should reconsider this view of life. We need to set up the strong claims of the present against an hereafter, which would cheat us out of here and now. This life is no more a pilgrimage than every future state. The conditions of well-being are the same for man in all states. The way to heaven is heaven, and heaven is nothing but a way — a method of the soul. The true doctrine is, as Mr. Emerson states it, "to find the journey's end in every step of the road."

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[4] As Christian examiners, then, we are met at the outset by a difficulty which we may not omit to notice. We mean, our author's relation to the Christian Church. Our admiration of his genius and our deep conviction of the worth of his labors are brought into collision with our want of sympathy with him in this particular. It is generally understood, and has constituted the chief ground of complaint against him, that Mr. Emerson is not a Christian in the usual and distinctive sense of the term, that is, not a believer in a special and miraculous revelation. It would be easy to blink this fact, seeing it is not made prominent in his writings; but we think it more honest to meet it fairly. We are not disposed to underrate its importance... .

[5] Mr. Emerson, if we understand his views on this subject, regards Christ as a mere teacher of moral and religious truths, — a reformer, not distinguished from other teachers and reformers except by the greater number of followers that have *chanced* to rank under his name, and the longer continuance and wider spread of his doctrine and influence in the world; — a Jewish Socrates or Plato; a little more perfect, perhaps, in his character, and a little wiser in his precepts, than those Greek sages, and perhaps not; at any rate, sustaining essentially the same relation to the rest of mankind. The Christian Church is a school or sect, founded by Jesus, in the same sense in which any other school is founded by any other philosopher. On this point we are at issue with him, and the difference between us is heaven-wide. We utter the deepest conviction of our soul, when we pronounce this view to be utterly inadequate and radically false.

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[6] But while we condemn this view of the Christian revelation, we are far from denying to Mr. Emerson all participation in the Christian faith. On the contrary, we affirm him to be a true Christian, in that sense in which one of the Fathers, we believe it was Jerome, declared Seneca to be a Christian, — as an asserter, that is, of Christian truth and Christian principles. Among the distinguishing features of Christianity, — we are ready to say *the* distinguishing feature — is its humanity — its deep sympathy with human kind and its strong advocacy of human wants and rights. In this particular, few have a better title to be ranked among the followers of Jesus, than the author of this book. Humanity is the distinguishing feature, also, of his writings. Not the humanity now in vogue, which views mankind in the lump and has respect only to the race; but a genuine regard for individual man.... It is not society in its collective capacity, but man in his personal and private capacity, that Christianity contemplates and addresses. So far, then, as this point is concerned, we affirm that our essayist has drunk more deeply of the Christian spirit, than some who in these days put forth peculiar pretensions to the Christian name.

[7] Mr. Emerson is by no means a denier of the Christian faith. If he errs in rejecting the form of revelation, he is very far from rejecting its substance and its spirit; very far from being a general unbeliever. That name belongs properly to those who reject not only the idea of a revelation, but everything that revelation contains, everything connected with the spiritual world. Mephistophiles

describes this class, when he designates himself as the spirit "that always denies." Mr. Emerson is not one of these spirits. We should rather characterize him as the spirit that always affirms. We lay great stress on this distinction. No prejudice, it seems to us, can fail to perceive the difference between such a writer and that class who deal wholly or mostly in negations, such as Byron, Rosseau, Voltaire. He is not a denier, but an affirmer; a sincere and consistent affirmer of moral and spiritual truth. It is of great consequence what a man believes, but of still greater consequence is it, that we do believe something with real and intense conviction. He who embraces a few great principles, with heart and soul, though he reject much that is worthy to be received, has a better title to be called believer, ay, and Christian too, than one who yields a feeble and politic assent to all that tradition prescribes, without converting the smallest portion of it into spiritual life. In this view, we pronounce the writer of these Essays a believer. One shall not easily find so great faith, no, not in Israel, as some of them manifest. We particularize the chapter on "Spiritual Laws," and that on "Compensation."

[8] It is this that constitutes the chief value of his writings, and makes him, although not generally ranked in that category, a more efficient teacher of morals, than most of those who are. Without any system, — for system is, once for all, no feature of his intellect, — but with keen perceptions in his mind, and noble sentiments in his soul, he inculcates the great virtues of truth and justice, with a persuasiveness not paralleled in any modern writer known to us. What preaching can be finer than ... this from the "Spiritual Laws."

"Always as much virtue as there is, so much appears; as much goodness as there is, so much reverence it commands. All the devils respect virtue. The high, the generous, the self-devoted sect will always instruct and command mankind. Never a sincere word was utterly lost. Never a magnanimity fell to the ground. Always the heart of man greets and accepts it unexpectedly. A man passes for that he is worth. What he is, engraves itself on his face, on his form, on his fortunes, in letters of light, which all men may read but himself. Concealment avails nothing; boasting, nothing. There is confession in the glances of our eyes; in smiles; in salutations; and the grasp of hands. His sin bedaubs him, mars all good impression. Men know not why they do not trust him, but they do not trust him. His vice glasses his eye, demeans his cheek, pinches the nose, sets the mark of the beast on the back of the head, and writes, O fool! fool! on the forehead of a king."

We should say that moral philosophy was Mr. Emerson's peculiar province, were it not that the over-weight of the poetical over the practical, in his composition, disposes him to look at things too much in the order of the imagination, not in the order of the understanding; and to show virtue as a beautiful phenomenon, rather than to illustrate its practical application.

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[9] Whether poetry or prose, force of statement is always a distinguishing trait in his writings. It constitutes their highest merit, rhetorically considered. The merit is not mechanical, — a trick of speech that can be copied. Many of the characteristics of his style have been imitated, but not this. It results from a vividness of conception peculiar to himself. To perceive a truth, with him, is to be on fire with it, is to blaze with it: it bursts from him in flashes of intense illumination. With most writers there is a certain distance between the thought and the word. The union is not complete. The thought is wedded, as well as may be, to a given vocabulary, or the vocabulary to the thought; but it is not always a perfect match. But Mr. Emerson's thoughts seem to make their own words. Thought and word hang together, like the lightning and the thunder in a summer cloud. It was said of Walter Scott, that no writer who has produced so much, is so little quoted or has so little that is "quotable." The reverse is true of Mr. Emerson. We

know not the writer who offers so much quotable matter, within the same compass. No writer compresses more meaning in fewer words. His sentences are compact and portable, like proverbs and axioms.

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[10] We love a bold and original thinker too well, not to extend some indulgence to the vagaries and extravagances which we have come to regard as inseparable from this kind. Such intellects are gracious gifts of the Most High, to be received with due thankfulness by a world not over-rich in that line, and needing all the varied lights which the Fountain and Father of all intelligence may see fit to shed on the unsolved problems of its perplexed life.

'But this light is of too meteorous and flashy a nature to be trusted with safety.' Well, then, view it as a meteor and enjoy it as such. Do not regard the author as a teacher at all, nor the book as a doctrine. It does not claim to be that. Regard it as a book of confessions; as a piece of beautiful egotism, than which nothing is more charming when it is sincere and without vanity or littleness. Viewed in this light, too, the book possesses great merit. A more sincere one was never written. A true record of a true soul; the rarest of all literary phenomena!

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[11] When there appears among us a great and original writer, fresh from the Father of lights, with new and rare gifts, — an eye that looks creation through, a heart that clasps creation round, and a voice of melody that surprises us out of our long sleep, piercing through all the folds of custom and indifference that were wrapped about our spirits, — when such an one comes and spreads for us an entertainment like that which these Essays provide, we will take what he brings and give God thanks, "asking no questions for conscience' sake;" and not lose the good which we have, in fretting for that which we have not; knowing that all things are not to be expected of all men. Nor is it a mere transient entertainment, which these authors provide. They do great service to the cause of truth; were it only by the stimulus which they give to inquiry, and the opportunity which they furnish, of settling anew, on new and higher grounds, the ancient faith. Whether they fight against the truth or for it, every way the truth is preached; and we "therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice." We rejoice that this spirit has been sent among us to live and work in our midst. We rejoice in being his contemporaries. We rejoice in the indications we perceive, of a growing appreciation of his works abroad. We believe that they are destined to carry far into coming time their lofty cheer and spirit-stirring notes of courage and of hope. We dare to predict for them a duration coetaneous with the language in which they are composed. They are books, the world "will not willingly let die."

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SOURCE: Frederic Henry Hedge, '[Writings of R. W. Emerson](#)', in *Christian Examiner*, 1845 (Jan.), vol. 38, pp. 87-106. Some long paragraphs have been divided; paragraph numbers have been added.

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