

Expanding Circles: Emerson and the Process of Incorporating New Ideas

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Abstract

This paper explores Ralph Waldo Emerson's concept of how new ideas and experiences are incorporated into one's previously held beliefs. It frames this process using William James's description of how our stock of old beliefs are altered by new experiences. The process begins with "novel contact" - when a new idea or experience is presented. This often leads to "incorporation" - when old beliefs give way to new ideas. However, incorporation is not always easy as deeply-rooted truths can limit the degree of newness that can be integrated at any given time. Emerson viewed this process as a constant source of progress and expansion, allowing individuals to draw power from the constant influx of new experiences and ideas.

Introduction

The concept of an "idea" can be easily trivialized, as people come up with countless ideas every day, most of which are not important enough to remember. There are pithy sayings that attest to the cheapness of ideas, such as, "A penny for your thoughts," and "my two cents." However, Ralph Waldo Emerson regarded new ideas with a sense of awe and admiration. His reverence for new ideas, regardless of their content, might be expected since his occupation was grounded in his ability to conjure up and articulate novel concepts for enthusiastic crowds at lyceum lectures. New ideas were the currency that kept his family fed, bought the honor and respect he garnered from his contemporaries, and enshrined his name in the upper echelon of American intellectuals. His ability to create new ideas also served as evidence that Emerson was in connection with the oneness of the oversoul and living by the tenets of his own spiritual philosophy.

Possibly due to the practical and philosophical significance that they commanded in his own life, ideas are often represented as powerful forces of change and improvement that could shape human culture and continuously reinvent and transform individuals. In *Representative Men*, a book celebrating great men and how their ideas influence others, Emerson wonders "how to illustrate the distinctive benefit of ideas, the service rendered by those who introduce moral truths into the general mind?"¹ Much has been written about Emerson's proposed primary *source* of new ideas, the oneness of the oversoul, but this paper will instead consider how new ideas are dispersed and introduced to the "general mind," or the wider population. After all, for new ideas to truly impact society, they must be spread and adopted by the population. Furthermore, as a public

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Representative Men* (Boston: The Riverside Press, 1883), 25.

intellectual, Emerson's conception of how ideas are spread presumably provides the logic for his particular presentation style, as he would tailor his style to maximize the spread of his ideas. Therefore, this paper will explore textual evidence clarifying Emerson's conception of the process the mind goes through when it encounters and incorporates new ideas.

As a starting point, I will compare and contrast the ideas found in Emerson's writings with the process as presented by the pragmatist thinker William James. James's account of how the mind incorporates new ideas and experiences was chosen for three reasons. First, he puts forth a clear and concise description of the process, which can serve as a worthy starting point for comparison. Second, Emerson maintained close ties with the James family, which began for William while he lay in his crib shortly after birth and continued through his early formative years, including visits to Emerson's home in Concord and his father reading Emerson's works aloud to him as a child.² Third, though they had their points of difference, according to James's heavily annotated editions of Emerson's essays, there were also considerable similarities that existed between the two thinkers.³ I will argue that on the topic of incorporating ideas, the similarities considerably outweigh the differences.

The Overwhelming Power of Ideas

In his essay "Circles," Emerson discusses how each individual is connected to the collective, and that the ideas of one are spread to the many. He argues that we are constantly transforming and improving ourselves through new ideas, which are then spread out to the world. He writes, "Our culture is the predominance of an idea which draws after it this train of cities and institutions. Let us rise to another idea: they will disappear."⁴ Emerson suggests that "an idea" creates, destroys, and drives all culture and civilization. He delights in the tongue-in-cheek warning: "Beware when the great God lets loose a thinker on this planet. Then all things are at risk."⁵ Of course, he prides himself on being just the sort of intellectual iconoclast that he warns against. He also suggests, "There is not a piece of science but its flank may be turned to-morrow; there is not any literary reputation, not the so-called eternal names of fame, that may not be revised and condemned. The very hopes of man, the thoughts of his heart, the religion of nations, the manners and morals of mankind are all at the mercy of a new generation."⁶ In yet another part of

² Frederic I. Carpenter, "Points of Comparison between Emerson and William James," *The New England Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (1929): 471-474.

³ Frederic I. Carpenter, "William James and Emerson," *American Literature* (Duke University Press) 11, no. 1 (1939), 40-57.

⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," in *Essays: First Series*, 279-300 (Boston: The Riverside Press, 1883), 282.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 288.

the essay he writes, “In the thought of to-morrow there is a power to upheave all thy creed, all the creeds, all the literatures of the nations, and marshal thee to a heaven which no epic dream has yet depicted.”⁷ In these statements, Emerson enthusiastically revels in the potent power of regenerative creation of new ideas.

Emerson believes that new ideas create a confluence between the old and new that constantly changes and moves individuals and civilization. New thought, he suggests, “is always a new influx of the divinity into the mind.”⁸ Emerson holds a fundamentally optimistic view that new ideas not only bring about change, but divine change of progress and betterment. This value judgment concerning the preference of the new over the old is presented in stark terms in the following quote from “Circles:”

Why should we import rags and relics into the new hour? Nature abhors the old, and old age seems the only disease; all others run into this one. We call it by many names, - fever, intemperance, insanity, stupidity and crime; they are all forms of old age; they are rest, conservatism, appropriation, inertia; not newness, not the way onward. ...In nature every moment is new; the past is always swallowed and forgotten; the coming only is sacred.⁹

For Emerson, the old is abhorrent, a disease, stupidity, sickness, and even a crime, while the new is natural and sacred. And how is it that man partakes in this sanctified blessing, this newness? He does so by receiving or generating new thoughts, or ideas. Emerson finishes the above paragraph by stating, “No truth so sublime but it may be trivial to-morrow in the light of new thoughts. People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them.”¹⁰ In other words, hope comes about through the process of actively testing old truths against new thoughts and maintaining the flexibility of adapting to these truths despite the human longing to be “settled” in the conservatism of the old and familiar. New ideas do not only make and remake all that civilization has produced, they also hold the power for unleashing growth and potential in the individual.

Novel Contact

Considering the significance that the process of incorporating new ideas had for Emerson, it is not surprising that he wrote about the issue. However, in typical Emersonian fashion, he does not simply catalog the process in a straightforward, analytical manner. Instead, his essays require a careful reading to tease out his thoughts. William James also explored this process in his book *Pragmatism, A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, which he published in 1907 based on lectures delivered the previous winter. The fact that the title suggests adding something new to

⁷ *Ibid*, 285.

⁸ *Ibid*, 288.

⁹ *Ibid*, 297.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 298.

old ways of thinking is significant, as explaining this process is one of James's central goals. Attributing some of the ideas to Schiller and Dewey, James begins explaining how "any individual settles into new opinions," as follows:

The process here is always the same. The individual has a stock of old opinions already, but he meets a new experience that puts them to a strain. Somebody contradicts them; or in a reflective moment he discovers that they contradict each other; or he hears of facts with which they are incompatible; or desires arise in him which they cease to satisfy. The result is an inward trouble to which his mind till then had been a stranger, and from which he seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions.¹¹

This stage will be referred to as "novel contact" as it describes how one comes into contact with new "opinions" or ideas. James's writing is clear and concise, requiring little elaboration. However, it is worth noting that James mentions "experience," which, for empiricists like James holds a similar place as ideas. Ideas originate through observation and reflection on experience, and in that sense, are self-contained extensions of experiences, with a similar potential for enacting change. Additionally, everyone believes that their own stock of old opinions is true and consequently serve as legitimate grounds to base their beliefs and actions. However, new ideas or experiences frequently arise that do not perfectly match previously held beliefs, and the stock of ideas and truths need to be reevaluated.

Like James, Emerson believes in the importance of experiential accumulation of knowledge. He describes collective ideas and truths as an enclosed circle, analogous to James's idea of an individual's stock of old opinions. At any given time, the contents of this circle correspond to the operative truths that guide a person's actions. According to Emerson, "The key to every man is his thought. Sturdy and defying though he look, he has a helm which he obeys, which is the idea after which all his facts are classified."¹² However, this guiding idea can be challenged when the mind is confronted by a novel contact that diverges from the current contents of his circle. "He can only be reformed by showing him a new idea which commands his own," writes Emerson.¹³ If the idea can command a place in the circle, the old stock expands to accommodate it. "The life of man," Emerson states, "is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger rings, and that without end."¹⁴ In this way, new ideas drive the expansion of humankind.

How is it that man can be shown a new idea, which leads to the expansion of his circle? Emerson considers an expansive array of potential sources. He frequently mentions nature, books, and conversations as noteworthy wellsprings of novel contact. However, his conception of

¹¹ William James, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).34-35.

¹² Emerson, "Circles," 283.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 283,284.

potential novel contact encompasses almost any action, emotion, or experience that lies outside of one's customs and daily routines. In "Education," Emerson notes how the constant influx of new ideas and experiences flow into the mind and reshape its character:

Is it not true that every landscape I behold, every friend I meet, every act I perform, every pain I suffer, leaves me a different being from that they found me? That poverty, love, authority, anger, sickness, sorrow, success, all work actively upon our being and unlock for us the concealed faculties of the mind? ... Whatever the man does, or whatever befalls him, opens another chamber in his soul—that is, he has got a new feeling, a new thought, a new organ.¹⁵

Emerson sees the internal processes of life, as well as the external world of experience in nature, as a classroom, a space of constant education where novel contacts are omnipresent. Significantly, he believes pain and suffering, poverty, sorrow and sickness also move the soul forward. This egalitarian conception of novel contact places the possibility for progress and development within the hands of everyone, not just those with the resources to pursue higher learning or expensive travel. This resonates with the unlimited landscape of potential advancement that is the promise of America, a source of inspiration for Emerson.

The quote also demonstrates Emerson's admiration for what is new and his optimistic belief that novel contact always ushers in positive progress. Although the suggestion that new experiences "all work actively" to unlock the faculties of the mind and open chambers of the soul could hold a neutral association if written by another author, for Emerson such an unleashing of potential has a distinctively positive connotation. The triple repetition of the word "new" in the last sentence also reinforces the passage's positive tone. This differs from the more scientifically minded James, who does not assign any value judgments to new experiences. For James, new experiences do not necessarily play a role in a linear model of progress and improvement.

Incorporation

From the initial stage of novel contact, James's process continues with what I will term "incorporation," the procedure by which novel contacts are begrudgingly integrated into the old stock of beliefs. Here James explains the natural resistance to change that occurs as an individual attempts to maintain his previous mass of opinions in the light of novel contact:

He saves as much of it as he can, for in this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives. So he tries to change first this opinion, and then that (for they resist change very variously [sic]), until at last some new idea comes up which he can graft upon the ancient stock with a minimum of disturbance of the latter, some idea that mediates

¹⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Education," in *Lectures and Biographical Sketches*, 123-156 (Boston: The Riverside Press, 1883), 129.

between the stock and the new experience and runs them into one another most felicitously and expediently.¹⁶

One key aspect of this passage is the “extreme” conservative nature of the mind. As a new idea is introduced, previously held opinions must be changed, but there is a desire to alter as little as possible of the old stock of beliefs, which dictate the individual’s beliefs about truth and reality, subjects for which the individual desires stability and order.¹⁷ Furthermore, since beliefs are created over time through a variety of experiences, one’s mind is not monolithic, so small changes to a limited number of ideas are possible. In fact, James suggests *only* small changes are possible. Though the wording is somewhat confusing, James is suggesting that the mind tries various ways to slightly alter this or that held opinion, depending on how strongly they are held or how easily they are changed, to accommodate the new idea, until a satisfactory link is finally created and the “new idea is then adopted as a true one.”¹⁸ He reiterates his point stating: “New truth is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions. It marries old opinions to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity.”¹⁹

In the essay “Circles,” Emerson discusses a similar process of incorporation. He describes how every idea in the old stock of beliefs “is threatened and judged by that which follows.”²⁰ He writes, “Every one seems to be contradicted by the new; it is only limited by the new. The new statement is always hated by the old, and, to those dwelling in the old, comes like an abyss of skepticism.”²¹ Emerson emphasizes that new ideas do not necessarily completely contradict old beliefs, but rather limit and refine them, aligning with James’s notion of incremental change rather than radical upheaval. The second sentence uses powerful language to convey the staunch opposition put forth by conservative forces when confronted by the new. James conveys a similar idea with his previously quoted statement, “they resist change,” but both Emerson and James agree that resistance typically gives way to acceptance when the new ideas are supported by sufficient truth claims.

Emerson continues to detail the process of incorporation, which usually progresses despite the initial resistance, by stating, “But the eye soon gets wonted to it, for the eye and it are effects of one cause; then its innocency and benefit appear, and presently, all its energy spent, it pales and dwindles before the revelation of the new hour.”²² This closely corresponds to James’s ideas when he writes, “until at last some new idea comes up which he can graft upon the ancient stock.” Emerson’s incorporation occurs when the new and the old can be envisioned under one

¹⁶ James, 35.

¹⁷ John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (Denver, CO.: Swallow Press, 1954), 159-160.

¹⁸ James, 35.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Emerson, “Circles,” 285

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

common cause. Elsewhere he writes, “Each new step we take in thought reconciles twenty seemingly discordant facts, as expressions of one law.”²³ After a mediating concept bridges the discordant facts, the new idea’s threatening character is reconceived as innocent and beneficial to hold. Finally, the new becomes part of the old, and the process repeats itself.

Although it should be expected, based on his distaste for the old, note how Emerson downplays and enervates the new idea immediately after incorporation, suggesting that it becomes effete as it joins ranks of the old, fated to be overcome by something new on the horizon. Emerson explains, “Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim.”²⁴ In other words, power is generated in the moment of incorporation, when multiple ideas are bridged and previously discordant facts are formed into one truth. This is the moment of clarity and newfound comprehension, when cognitive dissonance breaks to leave only a harmony of facts and newfound guiding truths. This is also a moment when one’s attachment to the past and desire for consistency must give way to some degree in order to accommodate the new facts.

Emerson’s theory of incorporation also recognizes the conservative nature of humanity as an obstacle for new ideas. In his essay, “Circles,” he uses the forceful movement of dominant thoughts and ideas into increasingly larger concentric circles as a symbol for the process of incorporation and individual expansion. While doing so, he discusses how conservative forces attempt to block new ideas. He writes, “For it is the inert effort of each thought, having formed itself into a circular wave of circumstance, - as for instance an empire, rules of an art, a local usage, a religious rite, - to heap itself on that ridge and to solidify and hem in the life.”²⁵ These conservative, dogmatic principles restrict the expansive nature of humanity and deny the development of a larger circle that should follow a novel contact. He explains that these conservative walls can be breached by new ideas, suggesting, “But if the soul is quick and strong it bursts over that boundary on all sides and expands another orbit on the great deep, which also runs up into a high wave, with attempt again to stop and to bind.”²⁶ Here, he reminds the reader of the repetitive nature of this expansion struggle while emphasizing the conflict generated by the clash between conservative forces and new ideas.

Whereas James suggests that new ideas are “married” to the old, Emerson frames the process in terms of endless conflict between castle-like conservative defenses and quick, robust forces of the new. Though both writers see the same end goal of incorporation, Emerson’s language is more violent. For example, he compares someone with new ideas to a “conflagration

²³ *Ibid.* 287.

²⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson; Volume II, Essays: First Series*, ed. Alfred Riggs Ferguson and Jean Carr, 25-52 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 38.

²⁵ Emerson, “Circles,” 284.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

[that] has broken out in a great city.”²⁷ Concerning another provoker of new thoughts, Emerson writes, “He smites and arouses me with his shrill tones, breaks up my whole chain of habits, and I open my eye on my own possibilities.”²⁸ While another reception of new ideas resembles an earthquake: “All that we reckoned settled shakes and rattles; and literatures, cities, climates, religions, leave their foundations and dance before our eyes.”²⁹ While new ideas burst, crash, shake, and burn in shrill tones, Emerson describes the silence of a dialogue where the old stock of ideas are not challenged, writing, “If they were at a perfect understanding in any part, no words would be necessary thereon. If at one in all parts, no words would be suffered.”³⁰ Both Emerson and James understand that the incorporation of novel contacts requires that the new idea can be integrated into the old stock of truths as to better guide one’s actions and provide a practical payoff for one’s life. But in this process, new ideas are also calling into question the very beliefs and truths that the individual has been relying on to guide his actions and interpret his environment. Emerson seems keenly aware that such an affront naturally raises the figurative hackles of the old stock of beliefs. Emerson’s descriptions of the violent clash between old and new ideas call into question the very beliefs and truths that individuals have relied on to guide their actions and interpret their environment. On the other hand, James does not emphasize this internal friction to the same extent.

Portraying the incorporation of new ideas as violent, however, is not to suggest that novel contacts should be avoided. On the contrary, in order to expand an individual’s circle, to progress from the despised old to the sacred new, man must depart from the silence created by agreement and rush headlong into the violence of different opinions. Emerson writes, “Other men are lenses through which we read our own minds. Each man seeks those of different quality from his own, and such as are good of their kind; that is, he seeks other men, and the *otherest*.”³¹ Emerson’s use of italics here emphasizes the absolute importance of difference to the efficacy of incorporation. Men are drawn to the “otherest,” the most unlike oneself to serve as a lens into one’s own mind. The utility of companionship and friendship correlates to one man’s ability to provide new ideas that test the other’s old stock of beliefs and the more different the person, the more violent the clash and the more beneficial the results. “Men cease to interest us when we find their limitations,” states Emerson.³² Their limitations are the points where they no longer challenge our beliefs by providing novel contacts. Addressing this problem, Emerson states “Rotation is [nature’s] remedy. The soul is impatient of masters and eager for change.”³³ When one man is exhausted, another

²⁷ *Ibid*, 288.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 292.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 290.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 291.

³¹ Emerson, *Representative Men*, 11.

³² Emerson, “Circles,” 287.

³³ Emerson, *Representative Men*, 23-24.

one with different ideas will take his place. Describing the “continual effort to raise himself above himself,” Emerson writes: “A man’s growth is seen in the successive choirs of his friends. For every friend whom he loses for truth, he gains a better.”³⁴ Though this view of friendship as mere means to an end may appear cold, Emerson believes we are all pieces of a greater puzzle, and that our purpose is to help each other to realize our potential as individuals, so less frequent contact with old friends may be a small price to pay for the never-ending progress of honing one’s truth, which is driven by the process of experiencing and incorporating new ideas.

There is, however, a limit to the amount of internal friction that can be tolerated before new ideas are simply rejected, in order to avoid jeopardizing too much of one’s self-identity. For this reason, not every novel contact leads to incorporation. For example, if a Young Earth creationist who believes the earth is less than ten thousand years old should see a news article about a fossil radiometrically dated to 50 million years ago, he would thoroughly reject the facts regardless of the scientific evidence. To accept the science would invalidate too much of the foundation of his truth and conception of reality. James explains, “An outree explanation, violating all our preconceptions, would never pass for a true account of a novelty. We should scratch round industriously till we found something less excentric [sic].”³⁵ For a new idea to be acceptable it must have a credible relation to our beliefs about the ways we perceive and experience the world and it cannot be too threatening to our old stock of ideas.

As a champion of new ideas over the old, one might expect Emerson to downplay or disregard the restriction on the degree of newness that can be accepted. However, throughout his writings, he acknowledges the limits of novel contacts. In his “Divinity School Address,” he writes, “Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul. What he announces, I must find true in me, or wholly reject.”³⁶ He draws a distinction between instruction and provocation, which fits with the process of novel contact. Instruction suggests too much agency from the external source, whereas new ideas must interact with one’s old stock of beliefs and uniquely adapt to what they find there, giving agency to the receiver. In short, new ideas engage with and provoke the old stock before both ideas bend and adapt to one another, leaving both changed in the end. Emerson goes on to suggest that if there is not enough common ground between the novel contact and one’s conception of truth, the novel contact is rejected.

The difficulty of incorporating radically new ideas is also presented when Emerson describes men whose ideas are ahead of their time. These “men of genius” present ideas that profane too much of the accepted beliefs of the day and are consequently isolated for it. While discussing such forward thinkers in “Representative Men,” Emerson states: “[A man of genius]

³⁴ Emerson, “Circles,” 286-287.

³⁵ James, 36.

³⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Divinity School Address,” in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alfred R. Ferguson, 71-94 (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 80.

must be related to us, and our life receive from him some promise of explanation. ...I have observed there are persons, who, in their character and actions, answer questions which I have no skill to put. One man answers some questions which none of his contemporaries put, and is isolated.”³⁷ Here again, Emerson states that when enough relation exists, novel contact can lead to some form of illumination, which amounts to a refinement of one’s truth and the subsequent expansion of his circle. If the gap is too great, however, the idea and its representative find themselves isolated, instead of incorporated into the zeitgeist. Both of these examples illustrate Emerson’s understanding that the natural tendency to conserve deeply rooted truths often limits the degree of newness that can be incorporated into individuals or society at any given time.

Conclusion

Throughout his writings, Emerson testifies to the power new ideas have to continually recreate local cultures and larger civilization. Such macro-scale changes only occur when they take root in the individuals that comprise the cultures. An idea’s potential for change lies inert until enough individuals activate it through the process of novel contact and incorporation. Emerson’s understanding of this process, which held a prominent place in both his life and philosophy, has been pieced together in this paper from a number of his essays.

Many of the discussed elements of the process of incorporation should be immediately recognizable in the following two sentences from “Education.” Emerson writes:

We have our theory of life, our religion, our philosophy; and the event of each moment, the shower, the steamboat disaster the passing of a beautiful face, the apoplexy of our neighbor, are all tests to try our theory, the approximate result we call truth, and reveal its defects. If I have renounced the search of truth, if I have come into the port of some pretending dogmatism, some new church or old church, some Schelling or Cousin, I have died to all use of these new events that are born out of prolific time into multitude of life every hour.³⁸

Paraphrasing the relevant concepts that William James would also agree with may help unpack the sentences and review the overall process of incorporation. For starters, both thinkers agree that the individual is defined by a set of beliefs and truths which guide his actions. These truths are constantly being tested and refined by a flow of new experiences and ideas, i.e., novel contacts. A desire for consistency and familiarity leads one to conserve certain fundamental truths, which become less flexible to revision from novel contacts. However, Emerson applies a positive value judgment to new ideas and experiences, while James remains neutral. For example, in the above quote, Emerson derides any “pretending dogmatism” that blocks a portion of the spectrum of life’s new experiences, the result of which he compares to a partial death.

³⁷ Emerson, *Representative Men*, 12.

³⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Education,” 132.

For Emerson, limiting the range of novel contact and incorporation robs the individual of the power generated in the moment of incorporation, when multiple ideas form into one truth. To have a fulfilling life, the individual must seek out ideas and experiences that conflict, within limits, with his own truths, despite the violent friction generated when new thoughts clash with the old. Emerson's ideal state of existence is the condition of constant progress, the ever-expanding circle where one draws the power to expand from the constant influx of new experiences and ideas. Therefore, the next time someone is heard trivializing ideas by offering a penny for your thoughts, remember the power and significance ideas had for Emerson and consider negotiating a higher price.

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