

2015

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### Recommended Citation

Popejoy, Michael (2015) "Emerson and the Environment: The Beginnings of American Nationalism," *Appalachia*: Vol. 66 : No. 2 , Article 5.

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# Emerson and the Environment

*The beginnings of American naturalism*

**Michael Popejoy**



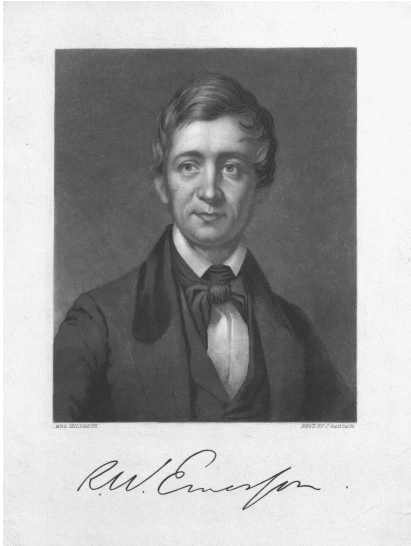
“THE FIRST IN TIME AND THE FIRST IN IMPORTANCE OF THE INFLUENCES upon the mind is that of nature.” You might be surprised that Ralph Waldo Emerson said this. Emerson is characterized primarily as a transcendentalist and idealist, not a naturalist. We might most immediately think of Emerson for his doctrine of self-reliance and as a bulwark of rugged American individualism. When it comes to nature, we often appeal to another of the Northeast’s most celebrated figures, Henry David Thoreau, with whom Emerson was good friends. However, Emerson himself left no shortage of footprints on the landscape; he took a walking trip to the Connecticut River, spent time in the White Mountains and the forest north of Bangor, Maine, and was part of an early expedition into the heart of the Adirondacks, to name a few. During an 1832 trip into the Whites, Emerson wrote, “The good of going into the mountains is that life is reconsidered.”

Not only did Emerson spend quite a bit of time out in nature, but he also thought and wrote extensively about the natural world. Emerson can be seen as offering a philosophical foundation for the subsequent development of American naturalism, which was picked up by the likes of Thoreau and John Muir and further developed in their own distinctive ways.

I will sketch that philosophy, according to which nature is a source of what Emerson calls “the eternal trinity of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty,” and explore how this approach might be relevant to our own relationship to nature and the environment.

Emerson wrote the following in his essay “Nature”: “At the gates of the forest . . . Here is sanctity which shames our religions . . . Here we find nature to be the circumstance which dwarfs every other circumstance.” Nature is the *sine qua non*. Without it, we and all that we are vanishes. We rose out of nature, are wholly dependent on it, and shall return to it. And there is much we can learn from our natural brethren: “I think that a man should compare advantageously with a river, with an oak, with a mountain, endless flow, expansion, and grit.” Furthermore, Emerson recognizes the healing power of time spent in nature. He said, “In all his weakness mankind is invigorated by touching his mother earth, that is, by habits of conversation with nature.”

*A pencil drawing by the author’s brother shows Emerson and his idea of “the transparent eyeball.” In his book, Nature, Emerson wrote, “In the woods, is perpetual youth. . . . I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all.”* JONATHAN POPEJOY



*Ralph Waldo Emerson as a young man.*

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Although, in my estimation, Emerson had much to say about nature and our relationship to it, we must depart from one aspect of his thought. He said that human beings' "operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing, that in an impression so grand as that of the world on the human mind, they do not vary the result."

This no longer holds true for us. Our species has changed the face of the globe to an unprecedented extent in the history of our planet, and this has come, and is almost sure to continue to come, with negative effects on the biosphere, us included.

So we must ask what we can do about it, what we *should* do about it, in an ethical sense, and act accordingly. I think that Emerson can help us here. I believe that his philosophy of nature can inform our approach to the environmental issues of today.

### **Truth in Nature**

"We are by nature observers, and thereby learners," Emerson wrote in his essay titled "Love." Here Emerson suggests that the fact that we are curious and observant creatures is the work of nature itself. But this power of observation, and potential for learning, can be applied to a multitude of things. In this section I'd like to explore what we might learn when nature, through us human beings, bends back upon itself and becomes conscious of itself; when one of its products has gained the ability to reflect upon that out of which it has arisen.

Implicit in this picture is that human beings are a part of nature; this view discourages the formation of a boundary that separates humans and nature as two alien forces that must vie with one another. The relation between humans and their physical environment has changed drastically in the history of our

species, particularly in the relatively recent past. We've come out of a physical environment saturated with "essences unchanged by man" and created one in which most people are surrounded by the human made. The question for us now is whether this trajectory will continue and what we might be missing if we lose touch with this nest from which we have flown.

Emerson wrote in *Nature* (Munroe and Co., 1836), "Every rational creature has all nature for his dowry and estate. It is his, if he will. He may divest himself of it; he may creep into a corner, and abdicate his kingdom, as most men do, but he is entitled to the world by his constitution. In proportion to the energy of his thought and will, he takes up the world into himself."

What was Emerson saying? What is this business about being entitled to the world by our constitution and taking the world up into ourselves? And how is this tied to rationality? The answer is connected to what nature teaches us when we observe it. Emerson seemed to think there's a common thread in the various truths that we glean from nature through observation. He wrote that man "finds something of himself in every great and small thing, in every mountain stratum, in every new law of color, fact of astronomy, or atmospheric influence which observation or analysis lay open." So what truth is it that we find everywhere in nature through observation, whether casual or of a more scientific stripe, that is also at the same time somehow a part of ourselves?

The answer for Emerson is that nature is *intelligible*, is law-governed, structured in accordance with rational principles, and I think there is a compelling case for our adoption of this stance today. The natural world is susceptible to being understood by our minds, and when you step back and think about this fact, it is astounding. Where we once thought that we had to offer supplication toward the heavens for rain, we now know that this process is governed by laws that we can grasp with our minds. There is a match, a fit, between the rational operation of our minds and the way that nature operates, like two interlocking puzzle pieces. And it is this match that we find in nature, its intelligibility, that we feel is of kin with us; we are entitled to nature because of our *rational* constitution, and we take up the world into ourselves in *thought*. We can reproduce in our minds the guiding principles of the world outside our minds, and this activity itself is the result of nature's handiwork. This account of truth in nature allows Emerson to say, "The ancient precept, 'Know thyself,' and the modern precept, 'Study nature,' become at last one maxim."

The tight connection between the rational mind and intelligible nature does not, however, give us license to see in nature whatever we will, to descend into a subjectivism where we can attribute processes and mechanisms to nature willy-nilly. Rather, we are constrained in certain ways by the demands of reason, but they are constraints that illuminate rather than shackle us in obscurity. Emerson's method is clear: "Some play at chess, some at cards, some at the Stock Exchange. I prefer to play at Cause and Effect." And, just like the rational approach to nature, the kinds of truths in nature that are uncovered don't seem to be random or willy-nilly, at least not on a macro scale. Emerson writes,

The first steps in Agriculture, Astronomy, Zoölogy, . . . teach that nature's dice are always loaded; that in her heaps and rubbish are concealed sure and useful results.

And furthermore, it's not the case that we find such truths only in what we happen to like, or in things that we happen to have an affinity with. They are found throughout everything, great and small, attractive or displeasing:

Truth has not single victories; all things are its organs,—not only dust and stones, but errors and lies. The laws of disease, physicians say, are as beautiful as the laws of health.

So in this way nature bends back upon itself and becomes conscious of itself as I said at the outset of this section: one particular component of nature, the human being, has been endowed by nature itself with the ability to represent in thought what takes place in the world, and in a way so as to potentially encompass all existing things. Emerson asks, "What is a man but nature's finer success in self-explication?," and goes even further in claiming, "The soul's communication of truth is the highest event in nature." The potential of human thought to grasp truth is a phenomenon that is astonishing in itself; in addition, however, this phenomenon serves as the foundation for objective claims about the existence of value and beauty in nature, which are topics I address later in this essay.

Emerson claimed that all rational creatures are entitled to the natural world because of their constitution, that is, in virtue of being rational. We have no reason to think that subsequent generations, whether already born or not, are likely to be any less rational than ours. Rather, we may have reason

to hope that they will be more rational, less self-interested and driven by the consuming flames of wealth. And if they are entitled to the natural world just as much as we are, a long ethical look in the mirror on our part is called for. We have an obligation to preserve the truth, goodness, and beauty in nature for those that come after us. This ethical imperative, however, is not only for the sake of these other rational creatures, but for the natural world more generally, and I now turn to the intrinsic goodness of nature.

### **Goodness in Nature**

Is the natural world, all by itself, a good thing? You might find yourself saying “Of course!”—immediately thinking of all the benefits that come from nature that human beings enjoy, ranging from the materials for our basic physical sustenance to those that, with our tinkering, enable us to do such things as fly to the moon. Or you might find yourself inclined to the opposite position, that nature is actually a bad thing, citing the violent history of evolutionary development that includes the sacrifice of an exorbitant number of organisms, “Nature, red in tooth and claw,” or the havoc wreaked upon human beings from such natural disasters as earthquakes or hurricanes. Or you might find yourself thinking that this question is misguided, that nature isn’t good or bad, but morally neutral. In this section, I explore what kind of resources there are for affirming that the natural world is indeed good, but for reasons other than those that appeal to the material benefits that we harvest from nature.

This distinctive answer to the question of whether nature is good arises from focusing a bit more on the “all by itself” part of the question with which I began. What we’re interested in here is whether there is value in nature, moral value, *in itself*, rather than being valuable merely *for* something else. Another way to put this distinction is whether nature is merely instrumentally valuable, only valuable as a means to the achievement of some *other* good, or whether it is what philosophers call intrinsically valuable, valuable in itself. If you think there’s any value in the world at all, you’re likely to think that there’s intrinsic value floating around somewhere—it would be quite odd to think that everything that’s good is only good as a means to something else, but that this chain of instrumental goods doesn’t reach an end point where we can find the intrinsic goods. Potential candidates for these intrinsic goods could be such things as the bare existence of human persons, or certain human activities, such as compassion or artistic creation, or certain experiences,

such as pleasure or awe. Focusing on the last candidate, and on pleasure in particular, has led many to extend the circle of beings worthy of moral consideration beyond our own species to other animals that can experience things such as pleasure and pain. In a way, the question of intrinsic value is a question about how far to extend the circle of moral consideration—to all human beings? to all sentient creatures? to all animals, to all living things, or even to “things” we don’t normally think of as individuals, such as ecosystems?

Emerson alighted on this distinction between intrinsic and instrumental goodness in the natural world long before it became the central point of debate that it is today. Regarding commodity derived from nature, which is Emerson’s correlate for instrumental value, he wrote that it is “the only use of nature which all men apprehend.” This focus on utility, or the usefulness of nature for some further end, is met with disapproval from Emerson, illustrated by his claim that with such an exclusive focus, “Nature is debased, as if one looking at the ocean can remember only the price of fish.” So if Emerson seems to think that there is more to nature morally than mere instrumental value, what kind of positive account of intrinsic value might he have the resources to offer? Somewhat cryptically, he wrote, “The idealism of Jesus . . . is a crude statement of the fact, that all nature is the rapid efflux of goodness executing and organizing itself.”

Putting aside the interesting reference to the teachings of Jesus, and how that might tie into his philosophy of nature, what we see here, I think, is a connection between goodness and truth in nature. Why does nature possess intrinsic value? Because it is intelligible, organized in accordance with rational principles, and this intuitively strikes us as a better state of affairs than complete and utter chaos, randomness, and disorder. And this value doesn’t rest on the fact that this characteristic of nature enables us to understand it—that would make it just another kind of instrumental value. Instead, the intrinsic value of nature rests on the fact that its intelligible structure enables the existence of organisms that possess an internal principle of development toward higher forms of complexity and that can therefore flourish in their particular ways. So what is intrinsically valuable are things that can undergo this kind of development, that can flourish, that can become good or excellent things of their kind. And this supports the extension of that circle of moral consideration beyond just the sentient creatures—the creatures whose flourishing is closest in kind to ours—to things whose flourishing might be radically different, such as plants, a species, or an ecosystem.



If this is too abstract to get the intuition going that nature possesses intrinsic value, consider a scenario in which you have the power to completely destroy an ecosystem and all the living things in it, some of which are unique to that area, but it doesn't contain any sentient beings, and you can somehow be sure that its destruction won't have any negative consequences on any sentient beings, including yourself. Would there be anything wrong with going ahead and destroying it, just for the heck of it? Intuitively, most of us think that there would be. And perhaps the best explanation for this intuition is that we think there is some intrinsic value in that ecosystem, one that goes beyond any economic value that it might have. The act would unnecessarily destroy swaths of encoded biological information that is the result of a long evolutionary history, in addition to ending the potential of individual living organisms to flourish, and for their descendants to continue to do so indefinitely. And that seems wrong—morally wrong.

My emphasis so far has been on nature's intrinsic value. I will end by talking about one of nature's instrumental goods, but one that is of great value to us: what we can learn from nature that can enable us to become better people. Emerson seems to think that this fruit is ripe for the picking from nature's bounty. He writes, "Every moment instructs, and every object: for wisdom is infused into every form."

What kinds of things might we learn from nature about what kind of a person to be, or about what kind of character to nurture? Emerson gave us the following brilliant example in his first book, *Nature*: "Who can guess how much firmness the sea-beaten rock has taught the fisherman?" Maybe you're not a fisherman, and maybe firmness isn't the lesson you need. But ask what it is from your experience of nature that you can learn from, that speaks to you, that might help you flourish in your distinctively human way. Nature can offer us wisdom on how best to live, on how to be virtuous, if only we will do our part by reflecting on it.

Reflection on nature, both on its intrinsic value and on what it might have to offer us by way of moral instruction, makes the conservation of nature imperative for the well-being and flourishing of all living things, ourselves included. This reflection allows us to combine the two emphases of traditional moral philosophy—doing moral actions, and developing a moral character. If we don't value nature, if we continue to be species-selfish, we're almost sure to deprive future generations, and likely even our future selves, of a great good, and that good is not merely the commodity use of nature, but includes such

practical goods as virtue, as well as the experiences of awe and wonder arising from interacting with nature. It is this experience of beauty in nature that I take up in the final section.

### Beauty in Nature

“I declare this world is so beautiful that I can hardly believe it exists,” Emerson wrote in his journal in April 1840. The beauty of nature can have a profound effect on our senses, those gateways from the outer world to the inner. That perception of beauty can result in disbelief in the very existence of nature as Emerson notes, or feelings such as awe, wonder, or amazement. But what is it about nature and the entities that make it up that cause us, often unwillingly, to feel or declare that they are beautiful?

One answer that Emerson offers is that “the simple perception of natural forms is a delight.” When we think of beauty in nature, we might most immediately think of things that dazzle the senses—the prominence of a mountain, the expanse of the sea, the unfolding of the life of a flower. Often, it is merely the perception of these things itself that gives us pleasure, and this emotional or affective response on our part seems to be crucial to our experience of beauty.

So in a way there is a correlate here to the intrinsic value of nature; Emerson said, “The sky, the mountain, the tree, the animal, give us a delight *in and for themselves.*”

Most often, it seems to me, we find these things to be beautiful not because of something else they might bring us—a piece of furniture, say, or a “delicacy” to be consumed—but because of the way that the forms of these things immediately strike us upon observation. One might even think that this experience of beauty is one of the bases for valuing nature—nature is valuable *because* it is beautiful.

Emerson seems to think that beauty in the natural world is not limited to certain parts of nature to the exclusion of others. He writes that every landscape lies under “the necessity of being beautiful,” and that “beauty breaks in everywhere.” I think Emerson would find the common lamentations about what we must “endure” during the winter months to be misguided:

The inhabitants of the cities suppose that the country landscape is pleasant only half the year. . . . To the attentive eye, each moment

of the year has its own beauty, and in the same field it beholds, every hour, a picture which was never seen before, and which shall never be seen again.

The close observer of nature sees a river in constant flux, even when the river's water is frozen and everything appears to be static and unchanging for a time. Nature can reveal its beauty in all places and at all times to the eye that knows how to look for it. We can hear Emerson wrangle with himself on this very point in the words of this journal entry:

At night I went out into the dark and saw a glimmering star and heard a frog, and Nature seemed to say, Well do not these suffice? Here is a new scene, a new experience. Ponder it, Emerson, and not like the foolish world, hanker after thunders and multitudes and vast landscapes, the sea or Niagara.

So if we're sympathetic to the idea that nature, or aspects of it, are beautiful, we might ask ourselves *why* we experience nature in this way. Emerson wrote that nature is beautiful because it is alive, moving, reproductive. In nature, we observe growth and development in living things, contrasted with the static or deteriorating state of the vast majority of that which is human made. More generally, he writes, "We ascribe beauty to that which . . . has no superfluous parts; which exactly answers its end; which stands related to all things." He cites natural structures as lacking superfluities, an observation that in general has been confirmed by the advancement of biology. Furthermore, he wrote that whether talking about a human artifact or a natural organism, any increase of ability to achieve its end or goal is an increase in beauty.

So in Emerson we might find the resources for seeing evolution and the drive to survive as beautiful rather than ugly processes, governed by laws that tend to increase reproductive fitness and that we can understand through observation and inquiry. And lastly, Emerson points to the relation between what we take to be an individual and the rest of nature as a quality of the beautiful. This consists in the "power to suggest relation to the whole world, and so lift the object out of a pitiful individuality." In nature, one doesn't come across individuals that are robustly independent from their environment; rather, things are intimately interconnected with their surroundings in ways that we don't fully understand.

“Nothing is quite beautiful alone: nothing but is beautiful in the whole.” All of these qualities of beauty seem to go beyond the mere impression of sensible forms that we started with, and what they require is what also served as the basis of truth and goodness in nature.

In addition to the immediate experience of beauty based in perception, Emerson suggests that the beauty of the world may also be viewed as an object of the intellect. He wrote, “The question of Beauty takes us out of surfaces, to thinking of the foundations of things.” In other words, we can also experience the world as beautiful because of its rational structure and our ability to grasp that structure through thought. Think for instance of the geometric structure of a crystal, or snowflake, or nautilus shell. Or consider the complexity of the fact that the reintroduction of the wolf in Yellowstone National Park changed the course of the rivers because of a chain reaction of cause and effect through the food web, a process called a *trophic cascade*. This reinforces Emerson’s emphasis on the interconnection between all members of the natural world; as observers of nature we are confronted with one giant, complex process that isn’t of our own making, but that we can also understand, and mentally grasp, even if only partially, and be awestruck in that process of understanding.

The beauty of the intellect has its emotional or affective component, just as the immediate beauty of perception does. If we destroy the natural world, we take away the things that we can marvel at and experience awe toward in these two ways. And this experience of the beautiful through the intellect may reinforce our attributing value to nature here as well, but a deeper kind of value, the intrinsic value I talked about. Nature is valuable because it is beautiful, but nature is beautiful because it possesses intrinsic value. This value comes from nature’s intelligible structure, which we experience in the beauty of the intellect. Thus, we see a close parallel between goodness and beauty in nature. We can find an objective basis for goodness and beauty in nature, namely its intelligible structure, but also see that nature is valuable and beautiful *for us*, with the particular apparatus that nature has given us for navigating our way through the world.

So that which is the basis of truth in nature and provides it with intrinsic value is also that which makes it beautiful. Emerson himself ties these three aspects of nature into one package:

He should know that the landscape has beauty for his eye, because it expresses a thought which is to him good: and this, because of the same power which sees through his eyes, is seen in that spectacle.

This is the unified philosophy of nature that I set out to explicate in the beginning. Nature is the source of truth, goodness, and beauty because of its intelligible structure and because of its production of organisms that can recognize that structure—us. And this view of nature includes an inherent call to protect that which is true, good, and beautiful. These are the things that we as human beings are searching for, are striving after, and yet they're right in front of us if only we would listen with our ears to the earth.

We are far from tying down, with our minds, the giant that is nature. Emerson wrote, "The perception of the inexhaustibleness of nature is an immortal youth." Although we shall continue to try to uncover nature's secrets, let us also continue to take pleasure in our immediate encounter with her. Let us continue to be awestruck, like the child on the seashore, or clambering up a tree. Let us hold onto that experience, and fight for the environment that makes it possible, both for the child in each of us, and for those that come after us.

*Quotations come from Emerson's first book, Nature, his journals, his lecture "The Uses of Natural History," and his essays "Nature," "Love," "Spiritual Laws," "Art," "The Over-Soul," "Method of Nature," "Circles," and "Beauty."*

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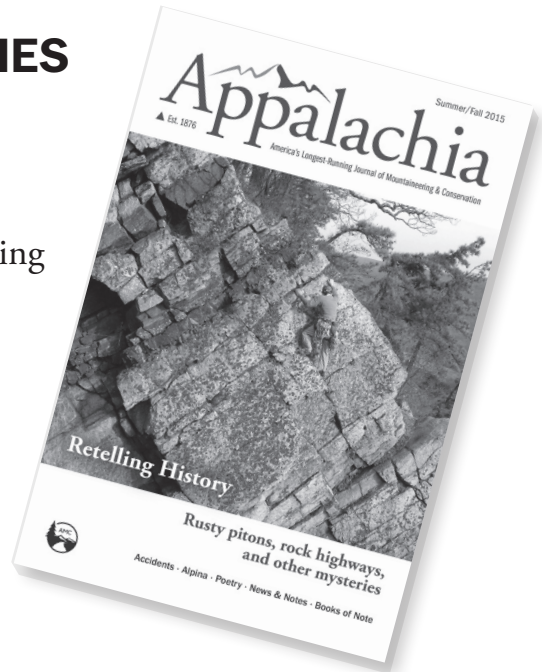
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