



Instant Karma Gonna Get You

Emerson is about as close as I get to formal religion, and at times I even wish he would write his essays less like sermons and more like rhetorical essays. Still, when I read an essay like “Compensation,” I remember why I was drawn to his writings in the first place, for Emerson manages to bring religion to our everyday life, and his argument somehow manages to make idealism seem pragmatic.

Just how he manages to do this might best be illustrated by contrasting his view of “Compensation” with the orthodox Christian view:

I Always wanted to be Ralph Waldo Emerson

Unfortunately there are too many differences between us for me to even think of emulating him. He was serene by nature, living in one place, practicing a simple Yankee practicality and piety. “He thought ‘noble things’ of God. His place on this earth preceded the Civil War, airplanes and autos, computers and the Internet.

For Emerson the world could fit together like a solved Rubik’s Cube. In the pastoral setting of Concord, Massachusetts, he wrote of the nature of the universe, constructing answers to life’s mysteries. After a Harvard education and entry into the ministry, he left his pulpit at the age of 29, finding he could no longer conduct communion with a whole heart to spend the rest of his life thinking, traveling to Europe, and gently living his life as a man who wrote.

Emerson to me has always been the more serene and confident of writer/philosophers. Of course, I have thought, he can be assured of his theories for very little had gone wrong in his life. He was able to attend Harvard, became a pastor of a Boston church, received fame and recognition for his writing, sailed to Europe and visited with Landor, Coleridge, Wordsworth and Carlyle. But Emerson suffered loss just as we all do. His first wife died two years after their marriage. A son by a second marriage died at the age of six. When Emerson was 69 years old his house burned. Emerson experienced the opposing forces of good, recognized calamity, received criticism for his work and understood such incidents were the taxes he paid for his productive life.

What would Emerson have written if he had lived in the twentieth instead of the nineteenth century? How would he have dealt with Osama Bin Laden, Enron, GW, cloning? His essays are so full of confidence and serenity they make me weep for that simpler time. And in this time of chaos, I wish everyone would read at least his essay “Compensation” and apply it to this time.

Emerson begins his essay

Ever since I was a boy I have wished to write a discourse on Compensation; for it seemed to me when very young that on this subject life was ahead of theology and the people knew more than the preachers taught.

People's intuition is more powerful than expert discourse. From the insights of intuition would come "a star in many dark hours and crooked passages." Emerson believed intuition was a universal part of every man, a skill "ahead of theology, perhaps better accessed by the people over the preacher." Because all of us to some degree or another have intuition, we are all capable of understanding nature, choosing to construct right over wrong. There is no need for the expert to tell us what to do. As a leading Transcendentalist, Emerson reasoned we could all transcend the laws of man to reach a higher, more noble power to acquire insight.

Insight is based on the knowledge of the existence of compensation in all things. My definition of compensation is this: In nature is a balance between good and evil. A cheetah kills a deer for food. Good for the cheetah--bad for the deer. This balance extends into our world. Payment is made for every good in one's life, and the opposite is also true: good can be found in every misfortune.

The Inevitability of Dualism

The first pages of Compensation explain this dualism and the fact that it is administered in this life as we live it on earth. We do not wait for heaven or hell of the afterlife to receive our reward or punishment.

In fact, the preacher is criticized and the parishioners admonished for not acknowledging compensation in this life--the preacher for assuming judgment "is not executed in this world; the congregation for accepting his word. Emerson saw this as a fallacy.

The fallacy lay in the immense concession that the bad are successful; that justice is not done now. The blindness of the preacher consisted in deferring to the base estimate of the market of what constitutes a manly success, instead of confronting and convicting the world from the truth; announcing the presence of the soul; the omnipotence of the will; and so establishing the standard of good and ill, of success and falsehood

What was true was the Polarity, or action and reaction in

every part of nature; in darkness and light; in heat and cold; in the ebb and flow of waters; in male and female; in the inspiration and expiration of plants and animals;...

Emerson is very good at giving many examples to support his theory that an inevitable dualism bisects nature.

The cold climate invigorates. The barren soil does not breed fevers, crocodiles, tiger or scorpions.

At first I thought there may be similarity of Compensation in Parmenides division of the world into pairs of opposites: "light/darkness, fineness/coarseness, warmth/cold, being/nonbeing that Milan Kundera manipulates in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, but the similarity doesn't hold. Emerson patiently explains the duality exists in each entity as two parts of the whole and not on a continuum which would separate the opposing forces.

This same dualism must also be applied to man. I need to emphasize within each of us are found the two sides.

Every excess causes a defect; every defect an excess. Every sweet hath its sour; every evil its good. Every faculty which is a receiver of pleasure has an equal penalty put on its abuse. It is to answer for its moderation with its life you have missed, you have gained something else; and for every thing you gain, you lose something.

Don't even think none of this applies to you. "Nature hates monopolies and exceptions."

There is no way to tilt the scales in your favor, diminishing loss or grief. A balance exists in all things.

The farmer imagines power and place are fine things. But the President has paid dear for his White House.

Things refuse to be mismanaged long. Though no check to a new evil appears, the checks exist, and will appear. If the government is cruel, the governor's life is not safe. If you tax too high, the revenue will yield nothing. If you make the criminal code sanguinary, juries will not convict. If the law is too mild private vengeance comes in. If the government is a terrific democracy, the pressure is resisted by an over-charge of energy in the citizen, and life glows with a fiercer flame...

There is dualism in all things natural and man made.

These appearances indicate the fact that the universe is represented in every one of its particles...

Every occupation, trade, art, transaction, is a compend of the world and a correlative of every other. Each one is an entire emblem of human life; of its good and ill, its trials, its enemies, its course and its end...

The true doctrine of omnipresence is that God reappears with all his parts in every moss and cobweb...If the good is there, so is the evil; if the affinity, so the repulsion; if the force, so the limitation...Justice is not postponed. A perfect equity adjusts its balance in all parts of life...Every secret is told, every crime is punished, every virtue rewarded, every wrong redressed, in silence and certainty. What we call retribution is the universal necessity by which the whole appears wherever a part appears.

Men seek to be great; they would have offices, wealth, power, and fame. They think that to be great is to possess one side of nature,--the sweet, without the other side, the bitter. This dividing and detaching is steadily counteracted...We can no more halve things and get the sensual good, by itself, than we can get an inside that shall have no outside, or a light without a shadow. There is a crack in every thing God has made.

Our action is over mastered and characterized above our will by the law of nature.

Harmony in this life is found then in the knowledge of how the natural universe operates and not in the attempt to oppose natural laws. I think of the scientists who are work on cloning, for example, and hope thought is given to the duality in the attempt. From successful cloning of animals may come benefit, but there will be a tax. At the moment I cannot think of any good that would come from cloning humans, thus upsetting the balance of nature.

The Recognition of Equity

Just as there is a balance in nature and in the institutions of man to acknowledge, there is also the recognition of equity in the social interaction between men and women. If equity among nations could be established what a peaceful world we could live in. It is the inequality among races and economies that lead to fear of the others. From fear comes the aggression and defense which cause wars.

All infractions of love and equity in our social relations are speedily punished. They are punished by fear. While I stand in simple relations to my fellow-man, I have no displeasure in meeting him. We meet as water meets water, or as two currents of air mix, with perfect diffusion and interpretation of nature. But as soon as there is any departure from simplicity and attempt at halfness, or good for me that is not good for him, my neighbor feels the wrong; he shrinks from me as far as I have shrunk from him. His eyes no longer seek mine, there is war between us; there is hate in him and fear in me.

Fear is an instructor of great sagacity and the herald of all revolutions.

The Compensation for Inequity

In the nature of the soul is the compensation for the inequalities of condition. The radical tragedy of nature

seems to be the distinction of More and Less. How can Less not feel the pain; how not feel indignation or malevolence towards More?... The heart and soul of all men being one, this bitterness of His and Mine ceases. His is mine. I am my brother and my brother is me.

I can yet love;...and the estate I so admired and envied is my own. It is the nature of the soul to appropriate all things. Jesus and Shakespeare are fragments of the soul, and by love I conquer and incorporate them in my own conscious domain. His virtue,--is not that mine? His wit,--if it cannot be made mine, it is not wit.

The Gift and Receipt of Favor

In order to maintain balance of equality, everyone must be aware of the goodness and benefit he receives and offer benefit to others in payment.

But for every benefit which you receive, a tax is levied. He is great who confers the most benefits. He is base,--and that is the one base thing in the universe,--to receive favors and render none.

Human labor...is one immense illustration of the perfect compensation of the universe. The absolute balance of Give and Take, the doctrine that every thing has its price,---and if that price is not paid, not that thing but something else is obtained, and that it is impossible to get any thing without its price,--is not less sublime in the columns of a ledger than in the budgets of state, in the laws of light and darkness, in all the action and reaction of nature.

The Battle between Virtue and Vice

Ever the optimist, Emerson thought virtue was in a constant battle with the forces of evil, an acknowledgment of how the dualism in nature works, that there is a constant tension between the two forces.

The league between virtue and nature engages all things to assume a hostile front to vice.

But misfortune exists. People lose money in the stock market, live with physical handicaps, bury loved ones. Just as there is a tax to be paid for the good things that happen for us, there is also good to be found in tragedy.

The good are befriended even by weakness and defect. As no man had ever a point of pride that was not injurious to him, so no man had ever a defect that was not somewhat made useful to him...Our strength grows out of our weakness.

Blame is safer than praise.

Thus do all things preach the indifference of circumstances. The man is all. Every thing has two sides, a good and an evil. Every advantage has its tax. I learn to be content.

The Compensation for Calamity

Such also is the natural history of calamity. The changes which break up at short intervals the prosperity of men are advertisement of a nature whose law is growth...But to us, in our lapsed estate, resting, not advancing, resisting, not cooperating with the divine expansion, this growth comes by shocks.

We do not believe there is any force in to-day to rival or recreate that beautiful yesterday...And yet the compensations of calamity are made apparent to the understanding also, after long intervals of time.

A fever, a mutilation, a cruel disappointment, a loss of wealth, loss of friends, seems at the moment unpaid loss, and unpayable. but the sure years reveal the deep remedial force that underlies all facts. The death of a dear friend, wife, brother, lover, which seemed nothing but privation, somewhat later assumes the aspect of a guide

or genius, for it commonly operates revolutions in our way of life, terminates an epoch of infancy or of youth which was waiting to be closed, breaks up a wanted occupation, or a household, or style of living, and allows the formation of new ones more friendly to the growth of character.

...the man or woman who would have remained a sunny garden-flower, with no room for its roots and too much sunshine for its head, by the falling of the walls and the neglect of the gardener is made the banian of forest, yielding shade and fruit to wide neighborhoods or men.

An acceptance of the natural balance in all things leads to serenity. This is also the attraction of Buddhism.

Exceptions to the Theory of Compensation

Some concepts are so powerful there is no compensating force.

There is a deeper fact in the soul than compensation, to wit, its own nature. The soul is not a compensation, but a life.

Neither can it be said, ...that the gain of rectitude must be bought by any loss. There is no penalty to virtue; no penalty to wisdom; these are proper additions of being.

There is no tax on the good of virtue, for that is the incoming of God himself, or absolute existence, without any comparative. Material good has its tax, and if it came without desert or sweat, has no root in me, and the next wind will blow it away. But all the good of nature is the soul's and may be had if paid for in nature's lawful coin, that is, by labor which the heart and the head allow. I no longer wish to meet a good I do not earn, for example to find a pot of buried gold, knowing that it brings with it new burdens. I do not wish more external goods,--neither possessions, nor honors, nor powers, nor persons. The gain is apparent; the tax is certain. but there is no tax on the knowledge that the compensation exists and that it is not desirable to dig up treasure.

Is the theory of Compensation too romantic to be applied to life in the twenty-first century? Would we greatly benefit if such application were made?

The answer to both questions is yes.

Written in 1841

Diane McCormick

The preacher, a man esteemed for his orthodoxy, unfolded in the ordinary manner the doctrine of the Last Judgment. He assumed, that judgment is not executed in this world; that the wicked are successful; that the good are miserable; and then urged from reason and from Scripture a compensation to be made to both parties in the next life.

In this version of reality, it's assumed that the wicked may thrive here on earth, but they shall certainly be punished in the hereafter. And the good shall indeed suffer here in poverty, but they shall be rewarded in the afterlife for their virtue.

Emerson, of course, does not accept this version of reality, or he would have nothing to write about:

The fallacy lay in the immense concession, that the bad are successful; that justice is not done now. The blindness of the preacher consisted in deferring to the base estimate of the market of what constitutes a manly success, instead of confronting and convicting the world from the truth; announcing the presence of the soul; the omnipotence of the will: and so establishing the standard of good and ill, of success and falsehood.

It certainly seems to me that that is a major, and unjustified, concession, though it may fit in well with the aphorism that the "meek shall inherit the earth." One may even suspect that the very purpose of such lectures

is to ensure the passivity of those attending service.

Emerson seems to base his overall argument on the concept that dualism is a necessary part of life:

An inevitable dualism bisects nature, so that each thing is a half, and suggests another thing to make it whole; as, spirit, matter; man, woman; odd, even; subjective, objective; in, out; upper, under; motion, rest; yea, nay.

This dualism is found not only in material objects but in the very nature of man:

The same dualism underlies the nature and condition of man. Every excess causes a defect; every defect an excess. Every sweet hath its sour; every evil its good. Every faculty which is a receiver of pleasure has an equal penalty put on its abuse. It is to answer for its moderation with its life.

Those of us who have been known to indulge one of our pleasure centers find it difficult to deny the common sense of his argument. Who can deny that too much ice cream brings its own pain while working out. On the other hand, work out too hard, and you're in agony the next day. In some ways, this argument reminds me of Hegel who argued where "satisfaction through the external pursuit of power and property tends to be rejected in favor of the attempt to achieve an inner state of harmony and tranquility."

Emerson's argues that there is a leveling circumstance for all people:

There is always some levelling circumstance that puts down the overbearing, the strong, the rich, the fortunate, substantially on the same ground with all others. Is a man too strong and fierce for society, and by temper and position a bad citizen, -- a morose ruffian, with a dash of the pirate in him;---- nature sends him a troop of pretty sons and daughters, who are getting along in the dame's classes at the village school, and love and fear for them smooths his grim scowl to courtesy.

Of course, this argument may not be quite as convincing as some of his other arguments. For instance, I'm not sure what kind of "leveling circumstance" it would take to bring Bill Gates down to the level of the ordinary man on the street. I'm not sure even Steve Jobs would wish such ill luck to fall on our friend Bill. Still, the bad luck that has befallen the Kennedy clan after Kennedy's election makes anyone wonder if there isn't such a force at work. Certainly "success," at least as our society defines, it does not ensure that kind of success that many of us are trying to attain in our lives. *

Emerson makes an equally strong argument, at least when buttressed with two outstanding novels that followed shortly after his address, *The Scarlet Letter* and *Crime and Punishment*, that:

Crime and punishment grow out of one stem. Punishment is a fruit that unsuspected ripens within the flower of the pleasure which concealed it.

Even modern psychology with its understanding of the subconscious seems to imply that secret guilt can be as destructive as overt punishment.

Every act rewards itself, or, in other words, integrates itself, in a twofold manner; first, in the thing, or in real nature; and secondly, in the circumstance, or in apparent nature.

And while it may be questionable whether "Every secret is told, every crime is punished, every virtue rewarded, every wrong redressed, in silence and certainly," there is at least a suspicion, as John Lennon pointed out, that "Instant Karma's gonna get you."

As he often does in his essays, Emerson resorts to mythology, that great reservoirs of human wisdom, to prove his point:

The Furies, they said, are attendants on justice, and if the sun in heaven should transgress his path, they would punish him.

Proverbs, like the sacred books of each nation, are the sanctuary of the intuitions.

While such sayings do not qualify as proof of an argument, they do suggest an enduring belief that such is true. Myths retain their appeal because they seem to capture universal truths.

Personally, my fondness for the absolutes of mathematics draws me to the following analogy:

On the other hand, the law holds with equal sureness for all right action. Love, and you shall be loved. All love is mathematically just, as much as the two sides of an algebraic equation.

This Swedenborgian reference to the power of love somehow rings true, though it may merely be due to my high school math teacher's constant emphasis on balancing the equation and not to the validity of Swedenborg's ideas. (though I was intrigued by the title of his most influential work, *Heaven and Hell*, and by the research that revealed that both Blake and Emerson were influenced by Swedenborg's ideas)(So much to read, and so much yard work waiting to be done.)

Even if we are not totally convinced by Emerson's argument, we are forced to consider the truth of lines like, "In general, every evil to which we do not succumb is a benefactor." I've certainly felt that way about the greatest "evil" in my life, the Vietnam War. Though I would give my very life to avoid repeating that disaster, I know that I learned more about myself and about human nature from my experiences there than through any other experience in my life.

For me, at least, it still remains to be seen whether the following is true:

And yet the compensations of calamity are made apparent to the understanding also, after long intervals of time. A fever, a mutilation, a cruel disappointment, a loss of wealth, a loss of friends, seems at the moment unpaid loss, and unpayable. But the sure years reveal the deep remedial force that underlies all facts. The death of a dear friend, wife, brother, lover, which seemed nothing but privation, somewhat later assumes the aspect of a guide or genius; for it commonly operates revolutions in our way of life, terminates an epoch of infancy or of youth which was waiting to be closed, breaks up a wonted occupation, or a household, or style of living, and allows the formation of new ones more friendly to the growth of character.

Wisdom often seems to come at a high price, and our losses may well be part of the cost. At the very least, such losses teach us much about our selves and our beliefs. They are the proof that can only be known through the test.

I'm almost ashamed to admit that Emerson's concept of "compensation" seems valid to me. With a few obvious exceptions, you know, those that "prove the rule," life does seem to even out. At times it seems to me that our idea of "historical progress" is pure bull shit. There is no more happiness or unhappiness at one time then there is at any other time. You are either happy or you're not. No amount of material wealth can make you happier than the man who has no need for wealth.

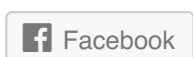
What's more, if the truth be known, I've never wanted to be anyone but myself. An ex-girlfriend used to make fun of me for lacking imagination at Halloween because I could never come up with an idea for a costume. I lay the blame not on a lack of imagination, naturally, but on the fact that I never really wanted to be anyone but myself. I've never, even as a child, had a "hero" that I can remember. And I never wanted to live any life but the one I'm living now, though at times I certainly wish I had lived this one a little more wisely.

If life has taught me anything, it has taught me that the people I most admire are the people who truly live their lives according to their deepest beliefs. It's hard to imagine a happier person than those I've known who lived a truly "Christian" life and demonstrated their love to others no matter how much money they might have had. They have no need of an afterlife.

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In "Emerson's Essays"

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Download a copy of Emerson's essays at: RWE Although I doubt that the definition Emerson offers in ["The Transcendentalist"](#); is the May 27, 2002
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Sometimes I suspect that education is wasted on young people. How many young people really need to read an idealist like Emerson, for June 6, 2002
In "Emerson's Essays"

May 28, 2002

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