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**THE PHILOSOPHICAL INFLUENCES WITHIN THE OVER-SOUL, BY R. W.
EMERSON**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	4
INTRODUCTION	6
THE OVER-SOUL.....	7
PLATO AND THE OVER-SOUL	9
HINDUISM WITHIN THE OVER-SOUL	12
BUDDHISM WITHIN THE OVER-SOUL.....	14
TRANSCENDENTALISM AND THE OVER-SOUL.....	16
CONCLUSION	18
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	19
BIBLIOGRAPHY	20

ABSTRACT

Emerson's synthesis of transcendentalism, idealism, and mysticism in *The Over-Soul* not only marks a pivotal moment in the development of American philosophical thought but also serves as a testament to the enduring appeal of his ideas. The essay continues to inspire contemporary discussions on the nature of consciousness, the relationship between the individual and the cosmos, and the significance of intuitive knowledge in the pursuit of higher truths. By weaving together diverse philosophical threads, Emerson's 'The Over-Soul' invites readers to contemplate the profound interconnectedness of existence and the spiritual dimensions of human experience.

The essay reflects Emerson's belief in the intrinsic unity of all things, blurring the boundaries between the self and the external world. Emerson uses a blend of philosophical ideas from various traditions to present the Over-Soul as a unifying cosmic force that transcends human consciousness and encompasses all living beings. This concept is reminiscent of the mystical traditions that emphasize the ultimate reality beyond the physical realm, a notion akin to interpretations of Christian theology and the writings of Plato and Eastern philosophers.

The Over-Soul, an essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson, represents a profound exploration of the transcendentalist philosophy that shaped his worldview. Published in 1841 as part of his 'Essays: First Series', Emerson's work delves into the complex interplay between the individual and the universal, reflecting the prevailing philosophical influences of his time. This work seeks to elucidate the philosophical foundations that underpin 'The Over-Soul', highlighting its significant transcendentalist, idealist, and mystical influences.

Keywords: The Over-Soul; Ralph Waldo Emerson; Transcendentalism; Plato; Neoplatonism; philosophy

RESUMO

A síntese de Ralph Waldo Emerson do transcendentalismo, idealismo e misticismo em *The Oversoul* não apenas marca um momento crucial no desenvolvimento do pensamento filosófico americano, mas também serve como testemunho do apelo duradouro de suas ideias. O ensaio continua a inspirar discussões contemporâneas sobre a natureza da consciência, a relação entre o indivíduo e o cosmos, e a importância do conhecimento intuitivo na busca por verdades superiores. Ao entrelaçar diferentes fios filosóficos, *The Oversoul* convida os leitores a contemplar a profunda interconexão da existência e as dimensões espirituais da experiência humana.

O ensaio reflete a crença de Emerson na unidade intrínseca de todas as coisas, borrando as fronteiras entre o eu e o mundo externo. Emerson utiliza uma mistura de ideias filosóficas de várias tradições para apresentar o *Oversoul* como uma força cósmica unificadora que transcende a consciência humana e engloba todos os seres vivos. Esse conceito lembra as tradições místicas que enfatizam a realidade última além do reino físico, uma noção semelhante às interpretações da teologia cristã e aos escritos de Platão e filósofos orientais.

The Oversoul, um ensaio de Ralph Waldo Emerson, representa uma exploração profunda da filosofia transcendentalista que moldou sua visão de mundo. Publicado em 1841 como parte de sua *Essays: First Series*, o trabalho de Emerson mergulha na complexa interação entre o indivíduo e o universal, refletindo as influências filosóficas predominantes de sua época. Este trabalho busca elucidar os fundamentos filosóficos que fundamentam *The Oversoul*, destacando suas influências transcendentalistas, idealistas e místicas significativas.

Palavras-chave: *The Oversoul*; Ralph Waldo Emerson; Transcendentalismo; Platão; Neoplatonismo; filosofia.

INTRODUCTION

Philosophy, humanhood and one's relationship with God or any celestial being is a complex theme to dissect when writing a text. Not everyone can discuss those topics without bias, whether it be a book, a poem, or a fictional story. However, 'The Over-Soul' brings those themes to light in a philosophical way that becomes more meaningful every time it's read.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his sensitive way of looking at the world, introduces the concept of the 'Over-Soul' while also making a profound reflection on what it means to be alive. Even though humanhood is not the main topic, nor discussed openly throughout the essay, it feels like a lesson on what it means to be human and be connected to a larger purpose.

Emerson's essay explores the relationship between the individual human soul and the universal Over-Soul, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all souls. Humanhood, in this context, could be interpreted as the shared essence of humanity that connects individuals to each other and the divine or universal spirit.

'The Over-Soul' encourages readers to recognize the connection to the Over-Soul and to look within their individual and collective spiritual potential. By embracing their humanhood and acknowledging the presence of the divine within themselves, individuals can access higher levels of wisdom, intuition, and creativity.

Emerson, besides being an essayist and philosopher, was also a transcendentalist, and this essay brings many of the Transcendentalism concepts to demonstrate what it means to be alive and connected to the Over-Soul.

Throughout the essay, it is possible to find philosophical concepts and ideas that inspired Emerson to create the image of the Over-Soul, including Hinduism, Immanuel Kant's theory on nature, Friedrich Schelling's views on human freedom, Platonism and others.

This work will discuss and analyze the philosophical influences within 'The Over-Soul' to gain a deeper understanding of Emerson's perspective while developing and maturing the concept of Over-Soul.

The focus will be on how Eastern philosophies, Platonism and Transcendentalist concepts are used throughout the essay. Many others will be cited as we take a deeper dive into The Over-Soul.

THE OVER-SOUL

In Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "The Over-Soul," the term "Over-Soul" refers to a central and complex philosophical concept. Emerson describes the Over-Soul as a universal and divine presence connecting all living beings, encompassing humanity and the natural world. It is a transcendent and unifying force that underlies all existence.

The Supreme Critic on the errors of the past and the present, and the only prophet of that which must be, is that great nature in which we rest as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity, that Over-soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart of which all sincere conversation is the worship, to which all right action is submission; that overpowering reality which confutes our tricks and talents, and constrains every one to pass for what he is, and to speak from his character and not from his tongue, and which evermore tends to pass into our thought and hand and become wisdom and virtue and power and beauty. (EMERSON, 1841)

One of the main concepts of the essay is the Over-Soul representing the idea of a fundamental unity or interconnectedness among all individuals, all forms of life, and the entire cosmos. It suggests that every person shares a common spiritual essence with all other beings, blurring the boundaries between self and other.

He will weave no longer a spotted life of shreds and patches, but he will live with a divine unity. He will cease from what is base and frivolous in his life and be content with all places and with any service he can render. He will calmly front the morrow in the negligency of that trust which carries God with it and so hath already the whole future in the bottom of the heart. (EMERSON, 1841)

The Over-Soul is regarded as a divine and spiritual essence that exists beyond the material and physical realm. It is considered eternal, unchanging, and perfect. Emerson suggests that the Over-Soul is the source of human intuition, creativity, and insight. By connecting with the Over-Soul, individuals can access profound wisdom and understanding beyond what can be obtained through conventional knowledge.

The author also encourages individuals to seek a direct and personal connection with the Over-Soul through introspection, contemplation, and spiritual exploration. He believes this connection enables people to tap into a higher level of consciousness and awareness. Emerson's concept of the Over-Soul often challenges traditional religious dogmas and institutions. He advocates for a more personal and direct relationship with the divine, emphasizing inner experience over external religious rituals. He frequently discusses the connection between nature and the Over-

Soul, suggesting that the natural world reflects this universal spirit. Nature is seen as a source of inspiration and a means of connecting with the divine.

The Over-Soul concept in Emerson's philosophy represents a belief in the unity of all existence, the presence of a transcendent and unifying force, and the potential for individuals to access higher wisdom and spiritual insight by recognizing their interconnectedness with the universal soul. It is a central theme in Emerson's transcendentalist philosophy and has impacted American literature and spiritual thought.

Ineffable is the union of man and God in every act of the soul. The simplest person who in his integrity worships God becomes God; yet for ever and ever the influx of this better and universal self is new and unsearchable. (EMERSON, 1841)

PLATO AND THE OVER-SOUL

One of R. W. Emerson's most considerable influences and inspirations is the Greek philosopher Plato. He constantly cites the philosopher's concepts throughout his works, and they play an integral role in this essay. Even though Plato is not directly quoted in 'The Over-Soul,' some philosophical ideas in Plato's writings share certain similarities with the notion of a transcendent or universal soul. In Plato's philosophy, the closest concept to the Over-Soul can be found in his Theory of Forms (also known as the Theory of Ideas), for example.

It's important to note that while there are conceptual similarities, the two philosophies are distinct and come from different cultural and historical contexts. Plato's Theory of Forms was developed in ancient Greece primarily as a response to questions about the nature of reality and the search for absolute truth. In contrast, Emerson's Over-Soul concept emerged in the 19th-century American transcendentalist movement, which had its unique perspective on spirituality and the relationship between the individual and the cosmos.

However, even though they are different in many aspects, the influence of Platonic thought can be discerned in several critical elements of Emerson's philosophy. Plato's Theory of Forms posited the existence of a higher realm of reality – the World of Forms or Ideas – where abstract, perfect, and eternal concepts reside. Although Emerson did not explicitly adopt Plato's theory, his idea of the "Over-Soul" shares similarities. Like Plato's Forms, the Over-Soul represents a transcendent and universal reality that exists beyond the physical world. It is a higher spiritual realm that embodies perfection and truth. This parallel reflects Emerson's debt to Platonic notions of transcendent truth and a higher reality.

Both Plato and Emerson were concerned with the idea of transcendence, the existence of a spiritual dimension that transcends the material world. Plato's dialogues often explored the concept of the soul's journey toward the divine and the eternal. Emerson's Over-Soul is, in essence, a similar concept — a divine and universal presence that transcends individual existence. It represents the idea that there is a higher, spiritual reality beyond the material world, a theme deeply rooted in Plato's philosophy.

In addition, Plato's "Republic" introduced the idea of philosopher-kings — rulers who possess exceptional wisdom and virtue gained through intellectual pursuits and a connection to the

World of Forms. In 'The Over-Soul', Emerson advocates for the importance of intuition, insight, and the individual's capacity to access higher wisdom. While not identical, these concepts share a common thread: the belief that individuals can attain wisdom that transcends ordinary knowledge and guides them toward a more enlightened and spiritually aware state.

Both Plato and Emerson were idealists in their own right. Plato believed in perfect, unchanging Forms that represented the highest ideals of concepts like justice, beauty, and truth. Emerson similarly emphasized the pursuit of higher truth and the importance of striving for moral and intellectual excellence. In "The Over-Soul," Emerson encourages readers to seek more profound insights and understanding of reality, mirroring Plato's emphasis on the search for eternal truths.

In addition, Emerson's Over-Soul shares similarities with Neoplatonism's concept of The One as the ultimate source from which all things emanate and the tradition of Mind over Matter. The Neoplatonists speculated that the creation of the universe as known, from a divine principle - or The One - had been happening forever and would continue to happen, creating a world without an end. Similarly, Emerson believed that we are all connected, including to the ones that came before us and the ones who will come after, and therefore, are part of a bigger Being or, as one could say, a transcendent Being. "The soul gives itself, alone, original, and pure, to the Lonely, Original, and Pure, who, on that condition, gladly inhabits, leads, and speaks through it." (EMERSON, 1841)

Another Neoplatonist concept found in the Over-Soul is the absolute consciousness that comes with the One. In Neoplatonic theory, Consciousness is viewed as the initial consequence of the One's activity, representing the highest form of reality. The main objective of consciousness is to understand while looking towards itself to find the answers to its existence. When reading the Over-Soul and what it is supposed to be, it is possible to connect with the idea of an absolute consciousness, as it connects everyone and everything in the Universe through the Soul. One could also argue that the concept of Consciousness is similar to what Emerson did throughout the essay, looking at his own beliefs and being to understand a bigger idea.

In conclusion, while Ralph Waldo Emerson did not directly reference Plato's works in "The Over-Soul," the influence of Platonic and Neoplatonic thoughts is evident in his philosophical ideas

and the themes explored in the essay. Emerson's concept of the Over-Soul resonates with Plato's notions of transcendence, the pursuit of truth and wisdom, and the existence of a higher spiritual reality. These shared philosophical underpinnings demonstrate the enduring influence of Plato's ideas on Emerson's transcendentalist philosophy, making "The Over-Soul" a continuation of a broader tradition of philosophical thought.

HINDUISM WITHIN THE OVER-SOUL

Along with Plato's ideals and the Neoplatonism concepts, Ralph Waldo Emerson also took ideas from Eastern philosophies, such as Hinduism. The Hindu philosophy brings the Brahman concepts the ultimate reality or universal consciousness that underlies and unites everything. Similarly, Emerson's Over-Soul represents a universal spirit or consciousness that pervades all of nature and connects all individuals. It reflects the idea that we are all part of a greater whole. However, other Hindu concepts inspired Emerson in the Over-Soul.

In Hinduism, there's a tension between the individual self (Atman) and the universal self (Brahman). The Atman is considered an expression of the Brahman. The Over-Soul explores the tension between individuality and universality. It suggests that each individual soul is a reflection of the universal soul, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all souls, something thoroughly discussed in the Upanishads' writings. This idea can be seen in the quote below.

We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. (EMERSON, 1841)

Both Hinduism and Emerson's transcendentalism strongly emphasize intuition and spiritual insight. Emerson believed that individuals could access higher truths and wisdom through their intuitive faculties, and this idea aligns with the Hindu concept of direct spiritual experience and insight.

The mind is one, and the best minds, who love truth for its own sake, think much less of property in truth. They accept it thankfully everywhere, and do not label or stamp it with any man's name, for it is theirs long beforehand, and from eternity. (EMERSON, 1841)

In Hinduism, nature is often seen as a manifestation of the divine, and Emerson's writings on nature and the Over-Soul reflect this idea.

More and more the surges of everlasting nature enter into me, and I become public and human in my regards and actions. So come I to live in thoughts and act with energies which are immortal. (EMERSON, 1841)

It is also important to note the strong influence of Hinduism on Transcendentalism, a philosophy Emerson was one of the leading figures of. Later, the influence of Transcendentalism in the Over-Soul will also be discussed. However, one of the central beliefs of the philosophy was the existence of a higher spiritual reality beyond the physical realm, transcending into an unbounded empire. This idea was inspired by the teachings of Hinduism's Upanishads and the

Vedanta, which brings the concept of a unity of spirit linking the human soul and the Transcendent, or as seen before, the Brahman.

However, even though the teachings and concepts of Hinduism deeply inspired Emerson, he adapted these ideas to fit into his philosophical framework and the cultural context of 19th-century America. The concept of the Over-Soul is a unique expression of his synthesis of various philosophical and spiritual influences.

BUDDHISM WITHIN THE OVER-SOUL

Emerson was inspired by various philosophies, including Buddhism. Although the similarities are not as glaring as with Hinduism and Neoplatonism, there are some comparable concepts between the Over-Soul and Buddhist teachings.

It's important to note that these similarities are not direct parallels but rather points of connection that can be drawn between Emerson's ideas and specific Buddhist concepts.

Both Emerson's Over-Soul and Buddhist teachings emphasize the idea of interconnectedness and unity. The Over-Soul represents a universal consciousness that connects all individuals and aspects of nature. Similarly, Buddhism teaches interconnectedness through the concept of *pratityasamutpada*, or 'dependent origination,' which explains that all things are interdependent and arise in relation to each other.

Also, the Over-Soul and Buddhism value spiritual insight and intuitive wisdom. Emerson believed that individuals could access higher truths and wisdom through their intuitive faculties. Buddhism similarly emphasizes the importance of insight (*vipassana*) and wisdom (*prajna*) gained through meditation and contemplation.

The soul is superior to its knowledge, wiser than any of its works. The great poet makes us feel our own wealth, and then we think less of his compositions. His best communication to our mind is to teach us to despise all he has done. (EMERSON, 1841)

However, many opposing concepts between The Over-Soul and Buddhism can be recognized and compared with ease, such as the concept of the Self. Emerson's Over-Soul implies the existence of an individual soul that connects to a universal soul, emphasizing a sense of selfhood. In contrast, Buddhism teaches *anatta* (no-self or not-self), which rejects the notion of a permanent, unchanging self altogether. Their ideas of transcendental experience are also opposing. While both perspectives involve that idea, Emerson's concept of the Over-Soul can be seen as a form of transcendent experience or realization that connects individuals to a universal consciousness. In Buddhism, transcendent experiences often involve deep meditation and insight, leading to liberation from suffering.

The rapture of the Moravian and Quietist; the opening of the internal sense of the Word, in the language of the New Jerusalem Church; the revival of the Calvinistic churches; the experiences of the Methodists, are varying forms of that shudder of awe and delight with which the individual soul always mingles with the universal soul. (EMERSON, 1841)

There are many similarities and many opposing concepts between the Over-Soul and Buddhism. Emerson's Over-Soul is a unique concept within the context of American Transcendentalism, and Buddhism is a distinct and well-established philosophical and religious tradition with its teachings and practices. While Emerson was inspired by Buddhist beliefs and teachings, it is safe to say that he was fonder of Hinduism as a source of knowledge and inspiration for his works.

TRANSCENDENTALISM AND THE OVER-SOUL

As the study of the Over-Soul evolved and developed, it was impossible not to be led to Transcendentalism and its concepts. Ralph Waldo Emerson was one of the most influential figures within the Transcendentalist movement and, therefore, constantly used its concepts in his work. The Over-Soul is one of them.

The concept of the Over-Soul, as seen in the previous chapters, was created by Emerson, based on different philosophies. That concept is included within the philosophy he created; in fact, it is a key element of the Transcendentalist movement that influenced their philosophies and other concepts such as unity of all beings and connection to nature.

On the first chapter of this work, it is listed some of the main elements of the Over-Soul and, although they are not the same, many of those elements can be found both in the Over-Soul and the Transcendentalist concepts.

Transcendentalism emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living things. The Over-Soul, as a universal spirit, was seen as the source of this interconnectedness, suggesting that all individual souls are inherently connected to a greater, divine, and universal soul. While the Over-Soul represented the unity of all beings, transcendentalists also emphasized the importance of individualism and self-reliance. They believed that every individual had direct access to the divine and that they should trust their intuition and inner convictions rather than conform to societal norms or external authorities.

The Transcendentalism movement often rejected materialism and the pursuit of material wealth, instead valuing spiritual and intellectual growth. The concept of the Over-Soul reinforced the idea that true fulfillment comes from spiritual connection and understanding rather than the accumulation of material possessions. They believed that nature was a reflection of the divine and that through nature, one could connect with the Over-Soul. This perspective led to a deep appreciation for the natural world and an understanding of the spiritual insights that could be gained through communion with nature.

The idea of the Over-Soul encouraged a heightened sense of ethical responsibility. Transcendentalists believed that because all individuals are interconnected through the Over-Soul, one's actions and thoughts have reverberating effects on the whole of existence. This understanding

inspired a commitment to moral and ethical behavior, rooted in the principles of unity, interconnectedness, and spiritual awareness.

Similar to the essay's inspiration, Emerson took much from the Eastern philosophies while developing and adapting Transcendentalism. It represented a departure from conventional religious and social beliefs, emphasizing the primacy of individual intuition, the inherent goodness of both people and nature and the interconnectedness of all living things, which circles back to the Over-Soul. In summary, the Over-Soul served as a unifying and spiritual force that guided transcendentalists in their pursuit of a deeper understanding of the self, nature, and the universe.

CONCLUSION

Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay *The Over-Soul* remains a seminal work in the history of American Transcendentalism and philosophical thought. Since its publication in 1841, it has profoundly influenced not only American literature but also various philosophical and spiritual movements worldwide. The essay's emphasis on the interconnectedness of all beings and the concept of a universal consciousness has had a lasting impact on the fields of spirituality, philosophy, and psychology, shaping the way individuals perceive their relationship with the world and the divine.

Emerson's exploration of the *Over-Soul* concept laid the groundwork for the development of later philosophical and spiritual movements, such as the New Thought movement, inspiring thinkers and writers to delve deeper into the nature of consciousness, the interconnectedness of all life, and the quest for a deeper understanding of the self and the universe. The ideas presented in *The Over-Soul* have resonated with various philosophical schools, including elements of Hinduism, Neoplatonism, and other spiritual traditions, highlighting the universality and timelessness of Emerson's insights.

Beyond its immediate impact, *The Over-Soul* continues to serve as a source of inspiration for contemporary discussions on spirituality, consciousness, and the unity of all existence. Emerson's emphasis on the power of the individual to connect with the universal and to recognize the divinity within oneself has left a profound mark on the trajectory of philosophical and spiritual thought, inviting individuals to introspect, seek transcendence, and embrace the interconnectedness of all life. As one looks back on the influence of *The Over-Soul*, it is possible to recognize its enduring legacy as a guiding light for those navigating the complexities of the human experience and the quest for higher spiritual understanding.

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