

SELF-RELIANCE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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1 Thesis

In this paper, I will reconcile Emerson’s vision of self-reliance with certain challenges of conducting life in the digital age. This digital age has witnessed fundamental changes in human behavior and human interaction via the rise of digital worlds and the projection of a digital self where this digital self is divorced, and often deceiving, of the real, true self. The rise of social media platforms like Facebook and messaging services like Gmail and Slack have fundamentally altered human identities, ultimately distancing human beings from the self-reliance that Emerson advocated for. Emerson’s ideas are not a solution for conduct of life in the digital age – in fact, I will identify in subsequent sections that certain components of Emerson’s self-reliance are contradicting and incompatible with such realities of everyday life. However, being said, certain Emersonian self-reliance are still relevant and, moreover, prescriptive for living better lives in this digital age by nature of encouraging individuals to become independent thinkers. Thus, a reconciliation of Emersonian ideas and of communication in the digital age is probably the most productive viewpoint to be developed in this project concerning the conduct of life.

2 Axioms

First, I will establish some axioms and definitions. The self-reliance being discussed over the course of this paper will strictly refer to the self-reliance of Ralph Waldo Emerson in his 1841 essay, “Self-Reliance,” which is defined by Emerson to be a “triumph of principles.” This triumph of principles, as Emerson argues, manifests itself in the way man carries itself in the presence of opposition, this opposition being identified to be one of standard social norms and of social propriety. In the context of the digital age, the social opposition resides largely in the digital world, which in this paper will refer to all forms of communication that occur over the screen, serving as a proxy for direct human-to-human interaction. Under this definition, Facebook, Gmail, Twitter, and Slack are all considered digital worlds while

something like the New York Times mobile app is not. This is an important distinction because a proxy for direct human-to-human interaction requires an interchange between human source and human receiver. In our New York Times mobile app example, the human source is fixed to be the writers of the New York Times while the human receiver is fixed to be the reader. Thus, no interchange of roles occurs between source and receiver, thereby disqualifying the New York Times as a digital world. In contrast, to participate in Facebook will necessarily require one to interchange between roles of receiving and sourcing information to friends and family, thereby making Facebook a truly digital world. The coexistence of these digital worlds makes this age we live in a digital age. Finally, our participation in these digital worlds makes us identify a digital self. This digital self is different and divorced from the real self because it requires capitulating to the demands of the digital world, one that would have never occurred had our real selves made the conscious effort to not participate the digital world in the first place. The digital self not only is divorced from the real self but also deceives the real self because the individual is no longer exposing himself to the risks that come with “triumphing of principle”. In order for a principle to triumph, there must have existed some struggle where that principle was under risk of attack. The digital world presents us with a world where there is less risk of challenging with principles becomes nothing truly is at stake in the digital world. With nothing truly at stake and all of the self’s time invested in this digital world, the self strays further and further away from the “triumph of principles” and thereby straying further away from achieving self-reliance in the digital world.

3 The Importance of Self-Reliance in the Digital Age

The pivotal argument governing the integrity of this paper is the importance of preserving self-reliance, these “triumphs of principles.” In this section, I will argue the merits of Emerson’s defined self-reliance and why such self-reliance is necessary for how we are to spend

our time living.

The best paradigm to use in illustrating the importance of self-reliance is to consider the difference between the human and the machine. In the digital age, new technologies have arisen to give machines greater computational power, becoming more specialized and more complex in approaching the capabilities of human beings. In such a situation, how can the human differentiate itself from the machine? The machine is pre-conditioned, pre-programmed, predictable up to a fault. Meanwhile, the human being, not subjected to these rules of conditioning and programmed structure, experiences certain freedoms. As Emerson writes, if we were indeed programmed by such a God, this God has “armed youth and puberty and manhood no less with its own piquancy and charm, and made it enviable and gracious and its claims not to be put by, if it will stand by itself.” If the human is to distinguish itself from the machine, the human must bring out the natural faculty to stand by itself.

This ability for human beings in asserting their differences from machines is necessary for conducting life in the digital age. From an economic perspective, self-reliance enables human beings to create value that machines are unable to think of. The machine, while more superior than the human being in performing only one task, is only capable of performing this one task. A human being can think of new tasks and new solutions to these tasks if the human steps outside of this digital world and think deeply about his/her relationship with this digital world. This deep thinking demands self-reliance. Otherwise, a human being without self-reliance will be completely influenced by the digital world. The actions of the human being without self-reliance will be indistinguishable and inferior to the machines that participate in this digital world.

The act of thinking deeply, independently, and creatively speaks to the “piquancy and charm” of Emerson’s self-reliance. This self-reliance is necessary for distinguishing ourselves from the machines, which is imperative in asserting human economic value in the digital world. However, economic value is not the sole criteria we should be using to gauge the

merits of self-reliance. Deeper questions of truth and our relationships with others come from our practice of self-reliance. Emerson describes these truthful relationships as being grounded in a faith in God, but I will demonstrate how we have to look past God in order to practice self-reliance in the digital age.

4 The Impossibility of Emerson's Self-Reliance

Emerson's depictions of self-reliance and its relationship with God do not appear consistent with Emerson's original definition of self-reliance. Emerson writes that "when a man lives with God, his voice shall be as sweet as the murmur of the brook and the rustle of the corn." In this digital age, this God that Emerson describes could best be seen as a metaphor for the creators of the digital worlds. Using Emerson's logic, if the creators of these digital worlds had a pure intention and divine purpose of enabling us to create a digital self, then we should be grateful and allow these creators to continue to absorb us in their digital worlds.

It's interesting to see how Emerson's ideas present a clear contradiction. By trusting a higher being who is free to manipulate this digital world to his or her liking, we no longer maintain ownership and responsibility of our own actions. Such an occurrence is the antithesis of self-reliance because self-reliance demands a "triumph of principles" rather than an absence of principles. Moreover, by placing complete trust in God or digital creator, we experience some of the problems that led to our loss of self-reliance in the first place. If we were to substitute any ideas or principles that were not our own in the name of God, we are compromising our very identity and very values, capitulating to "badges and names" and to "large societies and institutions." What's to say that God isn't a societal construct that is making us capitulate our own sense of identity, thereby leading us to forgo self-reliance?

Finally, there is humorous irony in noting that by adhering to Emerson's definitions of self-reliance and maintaining this relationship with God, we are following only the principles of Emerson and not principles of our own, which also makes us not truly self-reliant.

Being said, Emerson's point about God, however, is not to be fully discounted and disparaged. When Emerson speaks of God, he is referring to certain truths that we should not alienate ourselves from, for if we were to truly live lives of principle, our principles might not be grounded in truth, which may be problematic because becoming self-reliant also implies living lives of "goodness" as Emerson writes, and without a backing of truthful purpose in self-reliance, goodness cannot necessarily be found.

In the digital world, Emerson's notion of God has changed, and our relationship with God has also changed. Emerson's self-reliance is impossible in the digital age because of this changing relationship we have with God. In the digital world, we are at the mercy of the creators of these digital worlds, these creators not being God but individuals and corporations whose motives might not be truthfully aligned with that of ourselves. If we were to trust these creators of digital worlds with the same trust Emerson places in God, we are most certainly bound for complete erasure of self-reliance. On the other hand, if we were to completely reject these digital worlds and their creators all together, we experience an undesirable solitude. As Emerson writes, "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude."

5 Reconciliation

How best to live this life of the great man "who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" in the digital age? As Emerson argues, to live a life of the great man, one should not be socially isolated nor should one live after the world's opinion. To achieve this balance between the two undesirable extremes, we must reach reconciliation between Emerson's self-reliance and the changing worlds of the digital age.

To begin this reconciliation, we start by adhering to a strict interpretation of Emerson's self-reliance and then slowly amend instances of it so that this amendment is compatible

with the demands of the current digital age, to maintain socialization. This will enable us to identify how one can better live lives of great men “who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.”

I also would like to just point out that there is an importance to be made between a reconciliation rather than a compromise. A compromise suggests a mixture of two competing ideas that leave both ideas unsatisfied whereas a reconciliation suggests that one prevailing idea is still preserved amidst other competing ideas. In our reconciliation, there is no compromise of the very idea of self-reliance.

To start, the most strict interpretation of Emerson’s self-reliance would be to renounce complete usage of technology in the digital age. The decision to not participate in digital worlds is a clear demonstration of self-reliance because it is a triumph of a clear principle to not fetter one’s own life with the influences of social media and of the digital world. However, such a renunciation also places one in a position to become completely isolated from the rest of society, isolated to the point that basic correspondence with colleagues over email, meaningful relationships developed with clients and family over phone calls, and sharing important life updates over Facebook all vanish. In such a situation, the basic means to sustain life through work and relationships become jeopardized. To not participate in digital worlds outright is a limitation in itself to living life freely and sustainably.

We can consider an alternative where we practice a form of digital minimalism where we impose within our lives a structured use of digital worlds, the minimal amount for us to stay connected with our friends and family, and just so that we find ourselves with time to live lives where our principles experience struggle and challenge outside of the digital world, in order for a “triumph of principles” to materialize. This reconciliation is one where we do not place blind faith in the creators of the digital world as Emerson did with God, but one where we place faith in our principles becoming better through having experienced real struggle. By deliberately limiting our participation of digital worlds, we claim time again for principled solitude and henceforth achieve a renewed form of self-reliance in the digital age.