

R.W. EMERSON OR THE AMERICANS' PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD

R.W.EMERSON OU O MÉTODO FILOSÓFICO DOS AMERICANOS

Gabriel Guedes Rossatti

Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina/ UFSC - Brasil

jjrossatti@yahoo.com

Abstract: *In 1840, the French thinker Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) opened the sequel to his research on American democracy with the following statement: "I believe there is not, in the civilized world, a country in which one is less concerned with philosophy than the United States." He then added that Americans not only did not possess a proper philosophical school, as they did not pay attention to European ones. Notwithstanding, Tocqueville did notice a 'certain philosophical method' pervading the minutest actions of Americans, albeit being an unwritten philosophy. What Tocqueville did not know, though, is that by the time he wrote down these reflections, an American thinker by the name of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) had been steadily developping a line of thought which was somehow accordant with the notions that Tocqueville envisaged as the main traits of the American philosophical method. Thus, we shall argue that concomitantly to Tocqueville's perceptions of an original American philosophy marked by a refusal of speculative thinking, Emerson was already developping a very conscious practical and individualist philosophy very much alike what Tocqueville saw as the diffuse, for not being systematized, American philosophy. Thus, we shall take into consideration the Tocquevillean theory on the American philosophical method as developped in *De La Démocratie en Amérique II* in order to throw light on the concomitant Emersonian production from the late thirties to the early fourties of the XIXth century, giving special emphasis to the essay published in 1841 as *Self-Reliance*.*

Key-words: *American Philosophy. Individualism. Pragmatism. Transcendentalism.*

Self-Reliance.

Resumo: Em 1840 o pensador social francês Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) abria o segundo volume de sua aclamada pesquisa acerca da democracia americana (**De La Démocratie en Amérique**) com a seguinte asserção: "Acredito que não exista, no mundo civilizado, país que menos se preocupe com filosofia do que os Estados Unidos." Ele então acrescentava que os americanos não apenas não possuíam uma escola filosófica própria, como não prestavam atenção às europeias. Contudo, Tocqueville percebia um 'certo método filosófico' a permear as menores ações dos habitantes dos Estados Unidos, embora fosse um método implícito, não escrito ou desenvolvido em livros. Empregando, assim, suas habilidades filosóficas para traçar as origens desse método, Tocqueville desenvolve a seguinte – e peculiar – noção: "A América, assim, é um dos países do mundo onde menos se estuda e onde melhor se seguem os preceitos de Descartes." Descartes, dessa forma, é transformado, como que através de um truque de mágica, em um dos 'pais fundadores', embora nisso não estivesse sozinho, posto que Tocqueville aponta como outras fontes de tal método figuras como Bacon, Lutero e Voltaire. Mais especificamente, Tocqueville reconheceria que a filosofia americana possuiria três características: a) o desejo de julgar tudo por si mesmo; b) o 'gosto' do tangível e real e, c) o desprezo pela tradição. Logo, o método filosófico dos americanos é concebido por Tocqueville em termos tanto de sua crença na auto-suficiência da razão quanto de seu pendor para a vida prática, sendo, assim, interpretado como um método decididamente pragmático, voltado para a vida real dos indivíduos inseridos em situações concretas. Entretanto, o que Tocqueville não sabia é que na época em que escrevia tais reflexões um pensador americano chamado Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) vinha a desenvolver uma linha de pensamento semelhante a esta compreensão de Tocqueville acerca do método filosófico dos americanos. Com efeito, não apenas a filosofia de Emerson contemplava os

três itens enumerados acima, como podia já ser sintetizada na expressão auto-confiança, não por acaso título de um de seus mais célebres ensaios. Desse modo, argumentaremos que concomitantemente às percepções de Tocqueville acerca de uma original filosofia americana caracterizada pela recusa do pensamento especulativo, Emerson vinha já a muito conscientemente desenvolver uma filosofia prática e individualista muito semelhante àquela que Tocqueville compreendia como a difusa, por não se encontrar sistematizada, filosofia americana. Assim, levaremos em conta a teoria tocquevilliana da filosofia americana tal qual desenvolvida em **De La Démocratie en Amérique II**, publicada em 1840, de forma a esclarecer a concomitante produção emersoniana de finais da década de trinta a início da de quarenta, dando ênfase especial ao ensaio publicado em 1841 de título **Self-Reliance**.

Palavras-chave: Filosofia Americana. Individualismo. Pragmatismo. Self-Reliance. Transcendentalismo.

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The Emerson scholar Joel Porte, commenting on the renewal of interest upon the Emersonian production in the past couple of years, remarks that some of these interpretations are characterized by an attempt at shedding light on the contradictory elements present throughout Emerson's output, such as the odd mixture of 'transcendentalism' and 'pragmatism'¹. Notwithstanding, the very term *pragmatism* when applied to Emerson can be interpreted as *individualism*, and as such the present paper shall pursue this interpretation, drawing its main arguments from the essay 'Self-Reliance'. And if Emerson, according to the same scholar, has been more and more recognized as "[...] *the founding figure in the American philosophical tradition [...]*"², we shall develop such a reading by bringing in certain concepts wrought by another founding figure, this one the French social thinker Alexis de Tocqueville, also described as one who "[...] helped Americans define themselves [...]"³ from the very moment his production started being published on both sides of the Atlantic. Thus, we shall take as our point of departure the Tocquevillean notion of the Americans' philosophical method and its emphasis on individual reasoning in order to show that the Emersonian output of around the same period, that is, from the late thirties to the early forties⁴, is very similar to Tocqueville's considerations. In this sense, we hope to shed some light from two different angles on the foundation of what would be later called 'Pragmatism'.

¹ PORTE, Joel. Preface. In: PORTE, J.; MORRIS, Sandra (eds.). *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. p. xiii.

² Idem, ibidem. p. xiii (author's emphasis). Another scholar puts it this way: "He is celebrated as an originator of our virtues, and damned for releasing our vices." (MOTT, Wesley T. *The Age of the First Person Singular: Emerson and Individualism*. In: MYERSON, Joel (ed.). *A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. p. 62).

³ ZUNZ, Olivier. Tocqueville and the writing of American history in the twentieth-century: a comment. In: GUELLEC, Laurence (ed.). *Tocqueville et l'esprit de la démocratie*. Paris: Presses de Science Po, 2005. p. 141.

⁴ On a smaller scale, these years pretty much defined the careers of both authors, for they witnessed the release of Tocqueville's first works, volumes I and II of *De la Démocratie en Amérique* (respectively published in 1835 and 1840), as well as Emerson's first published works, *Nature* (1836) and *Essays* (1841), not to mention the very profound shift that led Emerson from the pulpit to the lecture series (cf. PORTE, Joel. *A Summer of Discontent: Emerson in 1838*. In: idem. *Representative Man: Ralph Waldo Emerson in his time*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979. p. 91-160). Indeed, in terms of the Emersonian production these years have been called "Emerson's radical period, [...] a four-year sub-phase of his high Transcendentalist career bounded on one side by the Panic of 1837 and on the other by his 1841-42 lectures on 'The Times'." (MILDER, Robert. *The Radical Emerson?*. In: PORTE, Joel; MORRIS, Sandra (eds.). *The Cambridge companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. p. 50.) On a grander scale, these are the last years of Jacksonian democracy (1828-40), whose government was throughout animated by the idea – shared, as we will see, by Emerson – that the common man was as worthy as the aristocrat (cf. SELLERS, Charles; MAY, Henry; McMILLEN, Neil R. (eds.). *Uma reavaliação da história dos Estados Unidos*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar Ed., 1990. p. 138-150).

On May 11, 1831, Tocqueville landed in New York with his friend Gustave de Beaumont for an intended project on the American penitentiary system supported by the French government. This trip would take them through several American cities – as well as through Canada – until they departed back to France on February 20, 1832. In fact, this would be Tocqueville's sole trip to the United States of America. Notwithstanding, Tocqueville's annotations and further readings would lead him to dwell on the subject of a nascent American philosophy, a subject which would appear as the opening chapter of his 'second Democracy', published in 1840. In there, Tocqueville argued that even though Americans did not pay attention to philosophy and other speculative sciences the way the French or other European people did, which means, in a bookish or erudite way, there could be recognized in America the effects of a certain method, as *unconscious* as it were⁵, of philosophy common to all:

To escape the systematic spirit, the yoke of habits, family maxims, class opinions and, up to a certain point, the nation's prejudices; to take tradition as nothing but information, and present facts as nothing but a useful study in order to do different and better; to search by oneself and in oneself the only reason of things, to keep in mind the result without getting attached to the means, and to gaze at things to their bottom through their form: such are the main traits that characterize what I would call the Americans' philosophical method.⁶

Employing his philosophical skills in order to trace the roots of this method, Tocqueville then comes up with the following amusing reflection: "America, thus, is one of the countries in the world where one least studies and where one best follows the precepts of Descartes."⁷ Descartes, then, as if by a trick of magic, is turned into one of the founding fathers, but he would not be the sole one, for Tocqueville next names other influences over the American spirit: Bacon, Luther and even Voltaire are thus summoned up as fountainheads from which spring the nineteenth century nascent philosophical America⁸. Thus, according to Tocqueville, American philosophy was characterized by the following traits: I) the desire of judging everything by oneself; II) the 'taste', in opposition to the lofty or ideal, of the tangible and real and, III) the despisal of tradition⁹. In this sense, Tocqueville sees in the combination of these, as well as in some other traits, such as the influence of Puritanism¹⁰, the source for the development of a decidedly practical conception of science:

[...] they love to see very clearly the object with which they occupy themselves; they separate it, thus, as much as they can, from its involucre, they put away everything that separates [them] [from these objects] and take away everything that hides itself to the sight, in order to see it closer and in full light. This disposition of their spirit leads them, next, to despise forms, which they consider as useless and irritating veils placed between them and the truth.¹¹

In this regard, he reckons that

⁵ “[...] they have never taken the pains to define their rules [...]. Americans have not had, thus, the need to withdraw their philosophical method from books, they have found it in themselves.” (TOCQUEVILLE, Alexis de. *De la Démocratie en Amérique II*. In: idem. *Œuvres II*. Édition publiée sous la direction d’André Jardin avec la collaboration de Jean-Claude Lamberti et James T. Schleifer. Paris: Gallimard, coll. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1992. p. 513, 515, respectively).

⁶ Idem, *ibidem*. p. 513.

⁷ Idem, *ibid.* p. 514.

⁸ Idem, *ibid.* p. 515.

⁹ Cf. idem, *ibid.* p. 551.

¹⁰ Cf. idem, *ibid.* p. 516-17, 547.

¹¹ Idem, *ibid.* p. 515.

In America, the strictly practical part of sciences is admirably cultivated, and so they devote themselves with care to the theoretical portion immediately necessaire to its application; Americans show, on this behalf, a very clear, free, original and fertile spirit; but there is almost nobody, in the United States, who devotes himself to the essentially theoretical and abstract part of the human sciences.¹²

Therefore, the Americans' philosophical method is conceived by Tocqueville in terms of both its belief in the self-sufficiency of reason and its stance towards practical life. It is, therefore, construed as a decidedly pragmatical method which both aims at and supports the real life of individuals embedded in concrete situations¹³. What he did not know, though, is that by the time he wrote down these reflections, an American thinker by the name of Ralph Waldo Emerson had been steadily developing a line of thought which was somehow accordant with the notions that he envisaged as the main traits of what he deemed to be the unconscious American philosophical method.

Strangely enough, though, Emerson's stance is all about bringing individuals to heed precisely to the *unconscious*, or rather the *transcendental* that pervades all and, with regard to human beings, more specifically, gives life its meaning as well as its direction¹⁴. In this sense, it is a philosophy of life aimed precisely at the *individual*: "In all my lectures, [he'd write in his journals] I have taught one doctrine, the infinitude of private man."¹⁵ Based, therefore, on this notion, Emerson would, throughout his career both as a lecturer and writer, expand on subjects connected to the development of individuality, as Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, just to cite one single example, is there to prove it.

As a matter of fact, the very first paragraph from Emerson's first published work, *Nature*, is a whole manifesto unto itself in terms of its exposition of this new point of departure in human history:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and a philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion of revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?¹⁶

The dismissal of tradition operated by the individual, itself a very complex and broad tradition later known as *Individualism*, is thus one of the cornerstones of Emerson's work. For Emerson, then, everything revolves around being able to approach the world with new eyes¹⁷, a philosophy whose social meaning would lead to the dismissal of Europe as the fountain of wisdom from which Americans should fill their cups. And that is precisely one of the main

¹² Idem, *ibid.* p. 552,

¹³ In another passage Tocqueville puts it more bluntly: "[...] Americans [...] do not demand from science [...] but the means to make life easy [...]" (Idem, *ibid.* p. 546).

¹⁴ "I conceive a man as always being spoken to from behind, and unable to turn his head and see the speaker. In all the millions who have heard the voice, none ever saw the face. As children play run behind each other, and seize one by the ears and make him walk before them, so is the spirit our unseen pilot. That well-known voice speaks in all languages, governs all men, and none ever caught a glimpse of its form." (EMERSON, Ralph. W. *The Method of Nature. An address to the Society of the Adelphi, in Waterville College, Maine, August 11, 1841.* In: idem. *Essays and Lectures.* New York: The Library of America, 1983. p. 124. Henceforward cited as *EL*).

¹⁵ Idem. *Emerson in his journals.* Selected and edited by Joel Porte. Harvard: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982. p. 236.

¹⁶ Idem. *Nature.* In: *EL.* p.7.

¹⁷ Idem, *ibid.* p. 48.

ideas from the oration given before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge, in August of 1837. For there Emerson said:

[...] Gentlemen, [among whom was one Henry David Thoreau] this confidence in the unsearched might of man belongs, by all motives, by all prophecy, to the American Scholar. We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe. [...] We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds. [...] A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men.¹⁸

The Emersonian assault on tradition would also take the form of straightforward criticism at the church, and this in the very face of the Bostonian priesthood. This fierce protest against “[...] the hollow, dry, creaking formality [...]”¹⁹ was meant to go down in history as *The Divinity School Address*:

I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me to say, I would go to church no more. [...] This man had ploughed, and planted, and talked, and bought, and sold; he had read books; he had eaten and drunken; his head aches; his heart throbs; he smiles and suffers; yet was there not a surmise, a hint, in all the discourse, that he had ever lived at all. Not a line did he draw out of real history. The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to people his life – life passed through the fire of thought.²⁰

To pass life through the fire of one’s most personal, most inalienable thought – “[...] the way of the self-relying [...]”²¹, as he had called it already in 1837 – meant getting to the point of admonishing his hearers, that is, future priests, in the *Divinity School Address*, to “Discharge to men the priestly office [...]”, an attitude of self-effacement, if not self-sabotage, which ultimately leads to the “[...] love [of] God without mediator or veil.”²²

This hyper-critical theory based both on reason *and* sentiment²³ would reach its peak under the guise of the essay *Self-reliance*, published in 1841 as part of *Essays – First Series*. For in that essay Emerson manages somehow to surpass himself in terms of his individualistic or iconoclast philosophy, coming to the brink of resembling some of the most radical thinkers of the period, such as the German philosopher Max Stirner. Indeed, as he admonishes his readers to non-conformity to social standards – “[...] self-reliance is its aversion [...]”²⁴ –, Emerson ends up translating his transcendental individualism to an almost stirnerian vocabulary:

The objection to conforming to usages that have become dead to you is, that it scatters your force. It loses your time and blurs the impression of your character. If you maintain a dead church, contribute to a dead Bible-society, vote with a great party either for the government or against it, [...] force is withdrawn from your proper life.

¹⁸ Idem. *The American Scholar*. An Oration before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Cambridge, August 31, 1837. In: *EL*. p. 70-71.

¹⁹ Idem. An Address to the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge, July 15, 1838. In: *EL*. p.86.

²⁰ Idem, *ibid*. p.84-85.

²¹ Idem. *The American Scholar*. An Oration before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Cambridge, August 31, 1837. In: *EL*. p.63.

²² Idem. An Address to the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge, July 15, 1838. In: *EL*. p.89.

²³ “The vision of genius comes by renouncing the too officious activity of the understanding, and giving leave and amplest privilege to the spontaneous sentiment. [...] desert [...] tradition for a spontaneous thought [...]” (Idem. *Literary Ethics*. An Address to the Literary Societies in Dartmouth College, July 24, 1838. In: *EL*. p. 100.

²⁴ Idem. *Self-Reliance*. In: *EL*. p. 261.

But do your work, and I shall know you. Do your work, and you shall reinforce yourself.²⁵

Despite Emerson's insistence on the use of words such as *force* and *power* throughout the essay, the transcendental element present in a relation of self-reliance, though, is never forgotten. In this sense, self-reliance is meant to be *elevation*²⁶, an attainment of higher knowledge and wisdom – if not *nature* –, all of them somewhat close to another emersonian favourite, this one the concept of *reform*²⁷. Thence the status of *founding text* it was to achieve for future generations of American scholars, once it proposes nothing more nothing less than a new order of things, of thoughts and dreams: “It is easy to see that a greater self-reliance must work a revolution in all the offices and relations of men; in their religion; in their education; in their pursuits; their modes of living; their association; in their property; in their speculative views.”²⁸

Individual self-reliance implies, therefore, a whole theory of society, a new *paideia* in which “[...] we feel that duty is our place [...]”²⁹ and “[...] imitation is suicide [...]”³⁰. Against La Bruyère, for whom “Everything is said, and one comes too late after seven thousand years of the existence of thinking men.”³¹, self-reliance is first and foremost a radically defiant calling to independence:

It is a mischievous notion that we are come late into nature; that the world was finished a long time ago. [...] Free should the scholar be, [...] free even to the definition of freedom, ‘without any hindrance that does not arise out of his own constitution’.³²

Thus self-reliance is another way of saying *freedom*, a concept which defines the American tradition from the war of independence to the writings of Emerson and his peers such as Thoreau, Fuller and the other Transcendentalists, to the present day. In this sense, Emerson is as important to the American consciousness as very few others are, which is reason enough to make anyone interested in the making of the modern world turn to the sage of Concord after, if not answers, at least some profound questions regarding one's self in the world.

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²⁵ Idem, *ibid.* p. 263-64.

²⁶ Idem, *ibid.* p. 273.

²⁷ “We are to revise the whole of our social structure, the state, the school, religion, marriage, trade, science, and explore their foundations in our own nature; we are to see that the world not only fitted the former men, but fits us, and to clear ourselves of every usage which has not its roots in our own mind. What is a man born for but to be a Reformer, a Re-maker of what man has made; a renouncer of lies; a restorer of truth and good, imitating that great Nature which embosoms us all, and which sleeps no moment on an old past, but every hour repairs herself, yielding us every morning a new day, and with every pulsation a new life?” (Idem. *Man the Reformer*. A Lecture read before the Mechanics' Apprentices' Library Association, Boston, January 25, 1841. In: *EL*. p. 146)

²⁸ Idem. *Self-Reliance*. In: *EL*. p. 275.

²⁹ idem, *ibid.* p. 277.

³⁰ idem, *ibid.* p. 259.

³¹ LA BRUYÈRE. Les Caractères ou Les Mœurs de ce Siècle. In: idem. *Œuvres Complètes*. Édition établie et annotée par Julien Benda. Paris: Gallimard, coll. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1951. p. 65.

³² idem. The American Scholar. An Oration before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Cambridge, August 31, 1837. In: *EL*. p.65.

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