

## Socrates and Emerson on Moral Authority

How a moral compass becomes defined is a question that has plagued philosophers for centuries. As morals are individual to each person, so are the beliefs of its derivations. Socrates believes that individuals have a personal relationship with the law and that guides our moral compass, while Ralph Waldo Emerson rejects laws instituted by society and urges reliance on the conscience instead. Despite their disagreement on how laws fit into the hierarchy of moral authority, both thinkers ultimately agree that God greatly influences our morality.

Socrates, especially in Plato's "Crito", demonstrates great respect for the laws of Athens, even as he awaits his execution. Despite seeming to disagree with the outcome of his trial in "The Apology", Socrates does not accept Crito's suggestion to escape his sentence. He believes an individual enters a binding, contractual relationship with the law from birth, even going so far as to envision it as a familial association. When he imagines the laws speaking to him directly, they remind him of this mutual agreement, saying, "...[we] brought you into the world, and nurtured and educated you, and given you and every other citizen a share in every good that we had to give" (Plato 26). Socrates owes his life to the state that raised him and doesn't want to breach the agreement, so he submits despite his innocence. His escape would be wrongdoing, not justice. The personification of the laws warn him:

If you go forth, returning evil for evil, and injury for injury, breaking the covenants and agreements which you have made with us, and wronging those whom you ought least to wrong, that is to say, yourself, your friends, your country, and us, we shall be angry with you while you live, and our brethren, the laws in the world below, will receive you as an enemy (Plato 26).

Even though Socrates acknowledges that doing evil in return for evil is the morality of many, he does not fall victim to that line of thinking out of respect for the law. Almost all of his decisions are influenced not by his conscience but by the imagined conscience of the state and its judgment.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Emerson does not maintain this same respect for the state and its institutions. He believes the self governs its morality without outside connections, ideally without any environmental influence at all. In “Self-Reliance”, Emerson holds that the ideal man makes decisions according to only what’s innately inside of him, saying, “... the moment he acts from himself, tossing the laws, the books, idolatries, and customs out of the window, we pity him no more, but thank and revere him” (Emerson 17). Unlike Socrates, there is no personification of justice to turn to for guidance. In fact, Emerson actively discourages this kind of behavior and views it as pitiful as the individual human mind is superior to anything born from the collective. When defining his moral compass, he says, “No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it” (Emerson 13). His nature rules his moral compass and he is only concerned with the preservation of that nature, not with situational ethics or issues extending past his own wellbeing.

The two thinkers' division is overwhelmingly apparent at first glance; however, there is a stronger force that unites them. Both thinkers and their opinions can be tied to an underlying spirituality, despite their differences on the surface. Socrates and his relationship with the state can be extended directly to his relationship with the divine. While the laws dictate a bulk of his tough decision-making, his obedience to the gods dictates all of his actions. In "Crito", he equates following the will of the law as following "the intimations of the will of God" (Plato 26). He also states at the beginning of his trial in "The Apology": "Let the event be as God wills: in obedience to the law I make my defence" (Plato 14). A connection is thus drawn between the laws, which he so respects, and God's will. The reason he finds himself in front of the court in "The Apology" is also his devotion to the gods, as he further explains, "After this I went to one man after another, being not unconscious of the enmity which I provoked, and I lamented and feared this: but necessity was laid upon me,—the word of God, I thought, ought to be considered first" (Plato 15). He knows the possible consequences of his actions and the negative reactions he may evoke, but he follows the will of God instead of his own. In his quest for wisdom, Socrates discovers that only God truly knows all and therefore is the rightful ruler of morality.

God is also the driving factor behind Emerson's advocacy of self-reliance. Even though he is outspoken against organized religion and often speaks ill of Christianity, he is not in opposition to the influence of God. As a follower of Transcendentalism, Emerson believes that humans are born with pieces of the divine embedded in them. Human nature therefore cannot be separate from God in any capacity and his endorsement of the self automatically includes spirituality. He specifically says, "The relations of the soul to the divine spirit are so pure, that it

is profane to seek to interpose helps” (Emerson 16). His contention with modern Christianity is the overreliance on external sources and the selfishness behind prayer, arguing that “Prayer looks abroad and asks for some foreign addition to come through some foreign virtue, and loses itself in endless mazes of natural and supernatural, and mediatorial and miraculous” (Emerson 17). He believes that organized religion merely interferes with the relationship between the self and God as the two are innately interdependent. As Emerson pushes for individuals to trust their own conscience to guide morality, he uses the soul’s spiritual connection as justification for the validity of humanity. Relying solely on one’s self can be a frightening concept, but he eases these fears by saying, “Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events” (Emerson 13). The reason Emerson is such a strong advocate of the self is that it can be traced back to the influence of God while outside authorities cannot. The self is divine and thus can be trusted to decide what is best for itself.

With divinity established as a common thread between the two thinkers, both also leave the reader with an important message about morality. Socrates ends, in both “The Apology” and “Crito”, with a reminder of God’s hand in humanity’s fate as he confronts his own demise. Meanwhile, Emerson concludes his essay with a warning about gambling with the chances God has bestowed upon humanity and that the reader should not count on outside forces to grant them favor. Instead, he urges the reader to leave with a mission to find peace within themselves, within that divine essence. So, with both thinkers’ messages in mind, the reader must go forth and explore their own relationship with the state, the self, and the divine.

## Works Cited

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