

Self-reliance without self-satisfaction: Emerson, Thoreau, Dylan and the problem of inaction

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Jeffrey Edward Green 

University of Pennsylvania, USA

Abstract

The idea of self-reliance is important not only because it is often taken to be definitive of the ethics of democratic individualism, but because its greatest theorists have been uncommonly forthright about a problem that, though familiar to ordinary civic experience, frequently gets ignored: that self-reliant individuality is a basis for not fully supporting otherwise endorsed social justice causes. This article turns to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Bob Dylan who are unusual for so honestly reflecting upon this problem and who, because of the differences in the way they conceptualize it, are instructive for civic ethics. I demonstrate that Emerson and Thoreau imbue their self-reliant withdrawal from social action with a self-satisfaction that is lacking for Dylan, who is much readier to acknowledge the moral costs of self-reliance. This acknowledgement does not invalidate self-reliance but alters its epistemological, ethical and political features, providing a variant of self-reliance more suitable to contemporary conditions.

Keywords

Bob Dylan, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, self-reliance, inaction, social justice

The idea of self-reliance has special relevance for the study of democracy. It is, in the words of George Kateb, the ‘philosophy of democratic individuality’ and ‘the soil and fruit and flower of modern democracy’ (2002, 197, 202). The democratic credentials of self-reliance are usually thought to reside in the fact that self-reliance is an ethical disposition that motivates support for democratic institutions as well as a way of life likely to flourish in democratic regimes and, for this reason, to attract people to

Corresponding author:

Jeffrey Edward Green, Andrea Mitchell Center for the Study of Democracy, University of Pennsylvania, 133 S. 36th Street, Room 338, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA.

Email: jegr@sas.upenn.edu

democracy. Self-reliance is not to be equated with mere egoism or individualism as such, but rather refers to a specific form of individualism committed to human equality and a non-antagonistic relationship to society. It needs to be distinguished, as Kateb points out, from forms of individualism that promote hierarchical judgements (Nietzsche), total war against society in the name of one's uniqueness (Byron), the use of others as one's artistic medium (Napoleon) or the idealist denial of any reality beyond one's own mind (2002, 31). Underlying the democratic character of self-reliance is the belief that its most central practices – freedom of thought, creative expression, sympathetic heeding of the environment (both human and natural), liberation from drudgery and above all a dedication to identify and live in light of one's innermost thoughts and convictions – are conducive not just to healthy self-development but to beneficial consideration and care for those around us. As Ralph Waldo Emerson, still the most influential philosopher of self-reliance, puts it: 'He only who is able to stand alone is qualified to be a citizen' (1903–1904c, 11:258), adding that 'society can never prosper, but must always be bankrupt, until every man does that which he was created to do' (2017a, 29). Emerson may hyperbolize here, but his statement is a powerful reminder of self-reliance's theorization as a specifically democratic form of individualism.

But the relevance of self-reliance to democracy is not just that it claims to define the ethical disposition of the democratic character but that in doing so it pays uncommon attention to a problem that rarely gets addressed in democratic theory and political philosophy more generally: the problem of democratic citizens *not* doing all they might do to support democratic reforms whose urgency and propriety they otherwise agree with and support. As much as self-reliance marks a democratic form of individualism it is not after all reducible to democracy itself. It can be practiced (at least by some) even when democratic conditions of free and equal citizenship do not sufficiently obtain. This means that within political situations where there is injustice and dire need of reform, which arguably is the condition of most states today, citizens committed to self-reliance have to face the trade-off between time spent on self-cultivation and time directly devoted to achieving critically needed political change. To deny this trade-off, as some interpreters of self-reliance have done, by assuming that self-reliant individuals will always work to achieve the self-reliance of others (e.g. Stryck 2001, 141–42) – or to deny it in opposite fashion, as some critics of self-reliance have done, by arguing that because self-reliance can lead its practitioners to turn away from politics it is not democratic at all (e.g. Donoghue 2005, 42–43, 51; Winters 1938, 135) – is to miss what is so compelling and instructive about the political lives of the great practitioners and thinkers of self-reliance, who were simultaneously democrats fighting against injustice but also honest about their unwillingness to devote themselves to their political causes completely or even dependably. The three practitioners and thinkers I examine here – Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Bob Dylan (whose belonging in this tradition I shall presently address) – are to my knowledge unique within the history of political thought precisely because they so thoroughly enunciate, acknowledge and to a certain extent defend their only limited willingness to work in behalf of democratic political causes they otherwise support.

To give an initial sense of this unusual posture, consider what Emerson proclaims in his 1840 lecture 'Reforms', in which he addresses reformers actively engaged in behalf of such causes as temperance, abolition and peace:

Though I sympathize with your sentiment and abhor the crime you assail yet I shall persist in wearing this robe, all loose and unbecoming as it is, of inaction, this wise passiveness until my hour comes when I see how to act with truth as well as to refuse. (Emerson 1959–1972a, 3:266)

Emerson does not renounce such causes, but only a permanent devotion to them. The matter is especially poignant with respect to slavery, the political issue that most galvanized Emerson during his lifetime. In a journal entry from 1 August 1852, Emerson writes:

I waked at night, & bemoaned myself, because I had not thrown myself into this deplorable question of Slavery, which seems to want nothing so much as a few assured voices. But then, in hours of sanity, I recover myself, & say . . . I have quite other slaves to free than those negroes, to wit, imprisoned spirits, imprisoned thoughts, far back in the brain of man, – far retired in the heaven of invention, &, which, important to the republic of Man, have no watchman, or lover, or defender, but I. (Emerson 1977, 13:80)

While Emerson is not disclaiming any role in the anti-slavery movement, he acknowledges that he is not as steadily committed as abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison or Wendell Phillips. To be sure, by 1852, Emerson had spent almost a decade giving addresses in support of emancipation, writing and publicly circulating letters against slavery and refusing to speak at Northern organizations that did not admit blacks as members (such the New Bedford Lyceum in 1846) – and he would go on to continue to speak out against slavery, sometimes at personal risk, and take other actions like providing material support to John Brown. Moreover, the immediate period of Emerson's journal entry is perhaps the high point of his anti-slavery activism, as it occurs in the period in which he was virulently calling for resistance to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law as well as eschewing his normal avoidance of partisan politics by actively campaigning for Free Soil Congressional candidate John Palfrey in 1851 and soon after Republican Charles Sumner in 1854. But even in this period, Emerson is self-conscious that he could be doing much more to fight slavery and that the reason for his not doing so stems from a more fundamental duty to self-reliant individuality. With regard to issues other than slavery, Emerson's self-consciousness of his lack of full engagement in behalf of causes he supports is given perhaps its most memorable articulation in his 1841 'Self-Reliance', in which Emerson takes critical aim at 'miscellaneous popular charities' and 'the thousandfold Relief Societies' – not presumably because he opposes the objectives of all such organizations, but because he lacks what he calls a 'spiritual affinity' to them, that is an authentically felt personal connection to these otherwise noble endeavours. Thus, in the same essay, Emerson can provocatively proclaim: 'Do not tell me, as a good man did to-day, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they my poor?' (Emerson 1971a, 263). These are not the words of an oligarch, market-utopian or

anti-statist. Nor are they the expression of someone in denial regarding the problems of the world or their susceptibility to improvement from human action. What lends these words force, and also makes them so unusual, is that they are expressed by a man supportive of the progressive causes of his day – who not only worked to combat slavery but also spoke out against Indian removal, supported women’s suffrage and donated to a wide variety of local and national charities – but who invokes his commitment to his own individuality as something that overrides his obligation to participate in social justice movements.

With Thoreau, too, as much as he has a well-deserved reputation as an activist engaged in civil disobedience to oppose an American regime that he considered corrupted by slavery and unjust conflicts like the Mexican War, there is a parallel articulation of an unwillingness to devote himself entirely to politics, even in behalf of manifestly just political movements. Thus Thoreau can say:

I do not think it is quite sane for one to spend his whole life in talking or writing about this matter [slavery], unless he is continuously inspired, and I have not done so. A man may have other affairs to attend to. (Thoreau 1996a, 153)

Likewise, Thoreau refused to join Vigilance Committees, even as he praised them as organizations devoted to protecting the vulnerable and administering justice (Rosenblum 1996, xviii). To be sure, there is some complexity in Thoreau’s posture, insofar as often his very withdrawal from political responsibility – his urging of his fellow citizens to forswear allegiance to the US government by desisting from voting, service in the militia and the payment of certain taxes – is an intensely political act of civil disobedience. But not all of Thoreau’s disengagement is of this character. Thoreau could speak ironically and critically of ‘benevolent societies’ and ‘philanthropic enterprises’,¹ claiming: ‘As for Doing-good, that is one of the professions which are full. Moreover, I have tried it fairly, and, strange as it may seem, am satisfied that it does not agree with my constitution’ (Thoreau 2018, 52). Thus Thoreau departs from later iconic activists his own civil disobedience helped to inspire – figures like Gandhi and Martin Luther King – by continually emphasizing his own lack of full commitment to eradicating the very evils he was sometimes also resisting. Indeed, what is importantly unusual about Thoreau is that, like King, he could indict the conventional kind of political moderation – taking to task ‘the freest of my neighbors’ who do not wish to resist the government because ‘they dread the consequences to their property and families of disobedience to it’ (Thoreau 1996b, 12) – but unlike King recognize and himself embody an alternate kind of moderation having to do with an unwillingness, as a matter of his own self-reliance, to be fully and dependably committed to political causes.

Dylan represents a 20th- and 21st-century continuation of this tradition of acknowledging, in the name of self-reliant individuality, an unwillingness to consistently work in behalf of otherwise endorsed democratic causes. Consider what Dylan proclaims in 1964 about the ongoing civil rights movement:

I agree with everything that’s happening but I’m not part of no Movement. If I was, I wouldn’t be able to do anything else but be in ‘the Movement’. I just can’t have people sit around and make rules for me. I do a lot of things no Movement would allow. (Quoted in Hentoff 2017 [1964], 28)

This is not the perspective of someone who thinks the world is just as it is or who questions the urgency of progressive movements from some vantage-point – libertarian, market-utopian, anarchist – that might call into question the importance of taking immediate social responsibility for others. Nor is Dylan's 'agreement' with the civil rights movement merely rhetorical, as in the years before 1964 especially Dylan authored and sang approximately 30 songs indicting society for its racism, militarism and unacceptable levels of poverty and inequality, played prominent roles in protest rallies (such as the July 1963 rally in Greenwood, Mississippi, following the assassination of Medgar Evers and the November 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom), refused to appear on national television when his song mocking anti-communists would not be allowed to be performed and attended numerous meetings in this period with activists from Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and other leftist organizations. Yet Dylan's eloquence in support of civil rights came to be matched by a no less stunning set of works (such as 'My Back Pages', 'Maggie's Farm', 'Restless Farewell', 'To Ramona' and 'Chimes of Freedom') as well as public statements (most notably his speech upon receiving the 1963 Tom Paine award from the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, ECLC) that announce his refusal to be a dependable political agent.

Why should Emerson, Thoreau and Dylan's public acknowledgement of their unwillingness to fully devote themselves to democratic causes they support, however unusual, be of interest to us? One aspect of the relevance of Emerson, Thoreau and Dylan for present-day democratic citizenship is that they are explicit and self-conscious about a problematic situation that, despite being definitive of a great deal of ordinary political experience today, is little discussed in contemporary democratic theory. If the most common way to render the tension between the 'liberal' and 'democratic' components of liberal democracy is as the trade-off between the protection of individual liberties and the empowerment of democratic majorities (Brettschneider 2007; Mouffe 2000), within the lived reality of actual liberal-democratic citizens this tension is likely to be experienced also in a secondary way: as the tension between attention to one's own individuality (the pursuits and self-cultivation that define each person's conception of the good) and attention to others who, due to injustice and other forms of suffering, are as yet unable to enjoy the benefits of full-fledged liberal-democratic institutions. Yet this problem remains mostly ignored by conventional perspectives within the study of democracy.² Given this current lack of theoretical reflection, Emerson, Thoreau and Dylan – in their thoughtful meditation on their lack of full support for causes they otherwise endorse – perform a function for ordinary citizens today similar to the function Emerson says poets play for the young: 'The young man reveres men of genius, because, to speak truly, they are more himself than he is' (1903–1904d, 3:5).³

But the relevance of Emerson, Thoreau and Dylan is not simply that they are reflective of common experience (that they publicly and contemplatively acknowledge what so many of us only silently and tacitly do), but that, taken together, they are instructive for democratic ethics. As I shall demonstrate, this instructive element stems from the fact that there is a key difference relating to the issue of whether the self-reliance informing inaction is imbued with what I term a spirit of self-satisfaction: that is, an ultimate ease about the moral status of their self-reliant withdrawal from social justice activism.

Emerson and Thoreau (but not Dylan) manifest such self-satisfaction in three distinct ways: their belief in the ultimate political efficacy of their withdrawal (their notion that their periods of disengagement enable a superior form of political activity); their providentialism (their faith in an ultimately benign and purposive cosmic order, which thus lessens the impact of their periods of inaction); and their view that they are largely free from complicity vis-à-vis the evils they elect not to fight. Dylan lacks these three forms of self-satisfaction, and also the speculative metaphysics on which they often rest, and as a result I shall argue that his approach to the tension between self-reliant individuality and democratic responsibility is preferable on epistemological, ethical and political grounds.

And it is this contrast between Dylan and Emerson and Thoreau that is the best justification for invoking Dylan as a profound thinker of democratic individuality. It might be doubted, after all, whether Dylan, because his ideas are expressed in poetic song lyrics, letters and interviews rather than essays and lectures, belongs in the same intellectual company as Emerson and Thoreau. There are numerous grounds for resisting this hesitance, however. Dylan's more poetic form of expression should not be held against him, but as Emerson and Thoreau (who themselves identified as poets) would be the first to understand, has the chance, when pregnant with philosophical insight, to present abstract ideas in accessible (because condensed and concrete) form. Emerson's dictum that 'the true philosopher and the true poet are one' (1903–1904e, 1:55) is a framework for appreciating the contributions of all three men. That Dylan achieves what other leading modernist poets like Ezra Pound and Allen Ginsberg attempted but could only very partially accomplish – the unification of poetry and song – should not be treated as a reason to question the intellectual potency of his art, but on the contrary is but further evidence of that potency. Moreover, Dylan is no mere entertainer, but someone who, within the confines of disenchanting secular modernity, has managed to achieve a genuine prophetic aspect, defined sociologically (the size, intensity and longevity of his following), formalistically (his frequent use of the imperative mood, his multifaceted appropriation of the bible and his explicit toying with his status as a prophet) and substantively (his repeated invocations of God, justice and selfhood as grounds of moral obligation). But the strongest reason for considering Dylan in the company of Emerson and Thoreau is that Dylan plays a vital role in the theorization of self-reliance as a democratic form of political ethics. The point is not simply that, as Dylan himself and other scholars have noted, Dylan enunciates and embodies ideals of self-reliance and self-consciously places himself within the Emersonian tradition (Ford 2003; Lethem 2006), but that, as has not at all been appreciated, Dylan articulates the ethic of self-reliance in a distinct (i.e. non-self-satisfied) way that has implications for democratic ethics more generally. Because Dylan is one of the very few to publicly reflect upon the limits of his willingness to support democratic causes he otherwise endorses – and, even more, because he does this in a manner lacking the self-satisfaction of his predecessors in this regard, Emerson and Thoreau – he has a vital role to play in the study of democratic individuality. It is true that Dylan's articulation of self-reliance is barer and less effusive than Emerson's or Thoreau's, but this stripped-down aspect is actually part of Dylan's contribution, since, as I will show, his is a self-reliance which lacks the metaphysical

excesses of Emerson and Thoreau – and the self-satisfaction these allow – and for this reason is ultimately more compelling.

I elaborate these claims in the following five sections: after briefly elaborating the common bases for all three men's resistance to full-time political activism (section 1), I describe the three ways in which Dylan's form of self-reliance lacks the self-satisfaction of Emerson and Thoreau (sections 2–4), concluding with a discussion of what I take to be the salutary implications for democracy of adopting Dylan's rather than Emerson's or Thoreau's form of self-reliant political inaction (section 5).

1. Emerson, Thoreau and Dylan's shared idea of self-reliant inaction

Seen broadly and from a distance, there is generic similarity in the way Emerson, Thoreau and Dylan articulate their respective refusals to be fully committed to social justice causes they otherwise support. The problem with activism, all three think, is that it usually requires affixing oneself to some larger organization (such as an association, movement or party), which not only imposes bureaucratic requirements irreducible to the political cause such activism serves but in its zealotry can promote the myopia of a single-issue or, just as bad, adoption of an overly narrow political identity. The self-reliance informing all three men's resistance to full-fledged organizational membership is not itself a single issue (but an infinite fount of creativity, expression and development) nor a narrow political identity (since it resists any easy identification with conventional political categories and demands that engagement with politics be conducted in one's own personal and evolving idiom).⁴ All three, therefore, share the concern that organized activism will lead them to become, in Emerson's words, 'mere mouthpieces of a party' (1977, 13:282) an 'instrument' of reform organizations (Emerson 1959–1972a, 3:260) or 'fractions of men' who have to compromise some aspect of their individuality in service to a larger political organization (Emerson 2004b, 79).

A further problem with social justice movements, identified by all three men, is that the individuals who operate within them as professional activists, philanthropists and reformers are often morally compromised – in the sense either of pursuing social justice for the sake of personal ambition or of using social justice as a substitute for inner emptiness (a lack of self-reliance) – and in such cases do not deserve to be too closely associated with or followed. In a well-known passage from 'Self-Reliance', Emerson takes issue with 'malice and vanity wear[ing] the coat of philanthropy', hypothesizing 'an angry bigot assum[ing] [the] bountiful cause of Abolition' out of 'uncharitable ambition' (Emerson 1971a, 262). As Thoreau makes clear, the problem is not limited to exceptionally disingenuous philanthropists but is an endemic risk of philanthropy itself: 'Philanthropy is almost the only kind of virtue which is sufficiently appreciated by mankind. Nay, it is greatly overrated; and it is our selfishness which overrates it'. What Thoreau is indicting here is less the philanthropist's own selfishness (though he criticizes philanthropists for so often overestimating what it is they accomplish and for using philanthropy to conceal their own 'private ail' at not having a clearer, more authentic sense of *self*-directed purpose) than the selfishness of recipients of philanthropy who, in gratitude for the charity they receive, bestow excessive praise on their

benefactors: ‘Every one must feel the falsehood and cant of this’ (Thoreau 2018, 54–56). With Dylan, the hypocrisy comes from the fact that activists working in behalf of even just causes often receive their livelihood from such pursuits and thus to a meaningful extent are bound to pursue them in the way of most job holders, yet unlike other job holders repress this fact. Referring to the attendees at a 1963 fundraising dinner for the ECLC in which he was given the Tom Paine Award, Dylan reports a kind of disgust:

These people at that dinner were the same as everybody else. They’re doing their time. They’re chained to what they’re doing. The only thing is, they’re trying to put morals and great deeds on their chains, but basically they don’t want to jeopardize their positions. They got their jobs to keep. There’s nothing there for me, and there’s nothing there for the kind of people I hang around with. (quoted in Hentoff 2017 [1964], 29–30)

A third generic similarity, based on the first two, is that Emerson, Thoreau and Dylan share the view that individuals should themselves determine their commitment to social justice. One chooses one’s own commitment when one selects which issue to pursue and when one engages only because one personally feels one must, rather than out of some externally imposed social pressure. Thoreau is especially clear on this point: ‘The only obligation which I have a right to assume, is to do at any time what I think right’ (Thoreau 1996b, 2). And Thoreau is emphatic that this duty does not lead in a universal direction, nor does it involve any necessary connection to combatting social injustice at all (Thoreau 1996b, 7). Believing that ‘you must have a genius for charity as well as for anything else’, the key for Thoreau is to devote oneself to political causes about which one feels a genuine sense of conscience (Thoreau 2018, 52). Emerson expresses similar sentiments, insisting, for example, on the need for each individual to discover one’s own ‘private solution’ to the ‘riddle of the age’ (Emerson 2017b, 1; also see 1959–1972a, 3:266). Dylan, while less explicit, seems to voice the same idea when, for instance, in ‘To Ramona’ – a song addressed to a woman (often thought to be based Joan Baez, in the context of the 1960s civil rights movement in the United States⁵), described as ‘torn/ Between stayin’ and returnin’/ Back to the South’ – the singer has no answer but can only advise: ‘Just do what you think you should do’ (Dylan 2016, 121). Other of Dylan’s political valedictory songs from the 1960s reflect a similar notion, such as his caustic farewell to formal affiliation with leftist political movements in ‘My Back Pages’, in which Dylan concludes by affirming that his withdrawal is not at the expense of moral conscience as such but only of a morality defined in terms supplied by the political Left: ‘Good and bad, I define these terms quite clear, no doubt, somehow’ (Dylan 2016, 126). In other words, Dylan, in withdrawing from organized Leftist politics, reaffirms his own personal sense of conscience, which may or may not lead to future political activism.

The limitation of one’s social activism to genuine acts of conscience does not mean that cooperation with others to achieve reform is necessarily ruled out, only that ideally such collective efforts should be achieved by a group of like-minded *individuals*, each personally committed to the cause, rather than by collective entities imposing external obligations upon their members. Emerson supports ‘natural and momentary associations’ in which individuals do not have to compromise with the strictures of organization because, in the effervescence of their inspiration, they are fully supportive of the

ends for which they are cooperating; hence he can write: ‘The union is only perfect, when all the uniters are isolated’ (2004, 79, 78). Emerson gives an example in his 1837 lecture ‘Society’:

A society of 20,000 members is formed for the introduction of Christianity into India or the South Sea. This is not the same thing as if twenty thousand persons without formal cooperation had conceived a vehement desire for the instruction of those foreign parts. In that case, each had turned the whole attention of the Reason, the quite infinite force of one man, to the matter, and sought by what means he, in his place, could work with most avail on this point. (Emerson 1959–1972b, 2:106)

Thoreau, too, contrasts the ‘exceedingly partial and superficial’ form of cooperation typical of most reform movements with a ‘true cooperation’ that is usually imperceptible (‘being a harmony inaudible to men’) because it is conducted by individuals motivated first and foremost by conscience rather than affiliation with a specific group (Thoreau 2018, 51). And Dylan as well imagines and voices support for a different kind of social activism, in which individuals personally take responsibility for a specific cause unmediated by a primary attachment to a political organization (see Lamont 2000–2018).⁶

On the basis of these three overarching ideas, Emerson, Thoreau and Dylan express a common unwillingness to devote themselves fully to causes they otherwise support and in so doing give voice to a problem that, however familiar in ordinary civic practice, remains largely unaddressed in the tradition of political thought. To be sure, it is well-known in political theory that social justice movements are undone not just by opponents but by sympathizers unwilling to devote themselves. But the usual way to make sense of this latter phenomenon is to attribute to the undedicated sympathizers various undignified standpoints – such as hypocrisy, cowardice or love of comfort – which have no intrinsic connection to the values of liberal democracy. For instance, Martin Luther King, when he confessed ‘I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council-er or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate’ (1986, 295), interprets the moderate’s relative inaction as stemming from an unjustifiably excessive attachment to social order.⁷ King’s critique is paralleled by the long tradition in republican political thought that affirms a trade-off between freedom and security, denouncing those whose addiction to the latter undermines a society’s ability to maintain the former (e.g. de Tocqueville 1835–1840, II.2, chaps. 10–14; Franklin 1818, 270; Rousseau 2012 [1762], I.4). By contrast, what the tradition of self-reliance reminds us is that it is possible to resist social justice movements on a basis no less freedom-focused than the call for such movements themselves. As Emerson, Thoreau and Dylan testify, social justice movements are moderated not just by a preference for gradualist policies but by *inconsistent commitment* to even radical objectives – and that, furthermore, the motivation for such moderation need not be over-attachment to order, security and comfort but a preference for the free use of one’s individuality over and against the seemingly limitless demands of social justice within a context of gross and widespread injustice.

But just as important as the similarities between Emerson, Thoreau and Dylan are the differences between them. The tradition of self-reliance offers not simply an

appreciation for the fact that the free use of one's individuality represents a check upon the claims of social justice movements, but a meditation on the appropriate manner in which individuals who do drop out of social responsibility ought to do so. There is an instructive difference between the way in which self-reliance informs the refusal of Emerson and Thoreau to be full-fledged political activists and the way it shapes Dylan's otherwise parallel refusal in this regard. Emerson and Thoreau evince a self-satisfaction about their relative inaction that Dylan does not share – a self-satisfaction that can be seen in at least three different respects: Emerson and Thoreau's tendency to interpret their lack of full devotion to political causes as still directly conducive to political reform; their uncritical faith that the world is ultimately a just order, thus diminishing the sense of their own political irresponsibility; and the belief in their capacity to extricate themselves from certain injustices, thereby eliminating their complicity. To be clear, the self-satisfaction I find in Emerson and Thoreau applies only to their conceptualization of their political withdrawal, not to their assessment of their intimate relationships, literary output or general conduct of their personal lives (topics about which their journals and letters often express genuine regret and dissatisfaction). But this self-satisfaction, even if circumscribed, is important since, as I argue in the concluding section, it has negative epistemological, ethical and political implications. Because Dylan lacks these three forms of self-satisfaction, he embodies a self-reliance that is starker, harsher and more bare but ultimately more honest and constructive.

2. The self-satisfaction of thinking self-reliant withdrawal from politics is still politically efficacious

Part of the self-satisfaction of Emerson and Thoreau consists in the fact that they understand the activities that lead them away from consistent involvement in social justice movements as still consonant with the ultimate objects of those movements. They do this in two distinct ways: conceiving of their time away from politics as nonetheless focused on 'self-reform' and 'self-emancipation' (and thus as related to, if not directly preparatory for, the purposes of formal political involvement in a democratic society) and, second, claiming that limiting their political involvement to moments of personal inspiration actually makes them more effective political actors than if they were more permanently but less passionately dedicated.

With regard to the first of these, both Emerson and Thoreau repeatedly use political metaphors to describe their time away from formal politics. Both liken the intellectual and spiritual pursuits that they practice outside of politics to the liberation of actual slaves. In a passage from *Walden* in which Thoreau is troubled by Northerners' attention to the 'somewhat foreign form of servitude called Negro Slavery . . . [remaining blind to] so many keen and subtle masters that enslave both north and south', he not only invokes the competing concern of self-emancipation but likens it to the mission of overcoming chattel slavery: 'Self-emancipation even in the West Indian provinces of the fancy and imagination – what Wilberforce is there to bring that about?' (Thoreau 2018, 4). This is not an isolated instance but a repeated trope for Thoreau, who conceives of his project of living at Walden Pond not simply as a self-liberation structurally similar to the liberation of actual slaves but as a process that could ultimately promote the emancipation of those

slaves. Two days after moving to Walden, Thoreau writes of his overarching ambition: ‘Self-emancipation in the West Indies of a man’s thinking and imagining provinces, which should be more than his island territory. One emancipated heart and intellect – it would knock off the fetters from a million slaves’ (1981, 1:362–63). Later, in 1856, Thoreau invokes similar rhetoric when he analogizes the importance of having a personal vocation to efforts to combat the expansion of slavery in the western territories:

For only absorbing employment prevails, succeeds, takes up space, occupies territory, determines the future of individuals and states, drives Kansas out of your head, and actually and permanently occupies the only desirable and free Kansas against all border ruffians. (1981, 2:156)

Emerson speaks in parallel fashion, invoking the political metaphor of liberation to describe the activities that keep him away from full-fledged social activism. He could claim in a public address in 1854, for example, that his own liberation was what inhibited a greater concern with public questions: ‘I have my own spirits in prison, – spirits in deeper prisons, whom no man visits, if I do not’ (1995, 73). The metaphor appears, too, in Emerson’s unwillingness to follow other Transcendentalists in accepting the invitation of George and Sophia Ripley to live in the utopian community of Brook Farm: ‘I do not wish to remove from my present prison to a prison a little larger. I wish to break all prisons. I have not yet conquered my own house’ (2004, 93). One can challenge Emerson and Thoreau here for invoking a metaphysical conception of inner freedom and a no less speculative notion of ‘self-reform’ to describe the literary and other activities that drew them away from politics. But even if Emerson and Thoreau are correct to suggest that we remain unfree to the extent we are distracted and disconnected from our innermost convictions, and even if they are also right that individuals who can reform themselves and discover and practice their authentic purposes can become all the more politically impactful as a result, the additional objection that should be raised to this kind of reasoning is that it allows Emerson and Thoreau to uncritically and no doubt inaccurately suggest that all of their time away from politics is in the service of *becoming* free (of achieving an urgently needed liberation) rather than taking advantage of the freedom they already enjoy.

Dylan does not do this. Rather than glorify his time away from social justice movements as being in the service of his own liberation, Dylan, in the condition of his political withdrawal, instead acknowledges his simple preference, as an already free individuality, to pursue other matters. In ‘Maggie’s Farm’, a song which seems to recall experiments like Brook Farm, Dylan impersonates an individual’s unwillingness to participate in cooperative efforts, not because he needs to secure his own liberation first, nor because such collective efforts are necessarily wrong, but because service to it flattens his individuality and thus becomes wearisome: ‘Well, I try my best / To be just like I am / But everybody wants you / To be just like them. They say sing while you slave and I just get bored. I ain’t gonna work on Maggie’s farm no more’ (2016, 144).⁸ Likewise, when Dylan juxtaposes himself in ‘It’s Alright, Ma’ to those who ‘speak jealously of them that are free’ (2016, 157), he presents himself as someone who already is free, who thus cannot rely on the idea of self-liberation to justify any continuing respite from social

justice movements and who accordingly has to face his time away from politics for what it is: a sacrifice of political conscientiousness. The virtue of these and other instances of Dylan's otherwise harsh disavowal of social responsibility – consider, as additional examples, 'I know you're dissatisfied with your position and your place / Don't you understand it's not my problem' ('Positively 4th Street', Dylan 2016, 211) and 'I can't help it if I'm lucky' ('Idiot Wind', Dylan 2016, 367) – is that they do not dress up the turn away from politics in the false vestments of a somehow enduring commitment to liberation and reform but rather acknowledge how the call of individuality can sometimes come at the expense of concerning oneself with the alleviation of suffering and unfreedom.

The second way in which Emerson and Thoreau, but not Dylan, present their lack of full-fledged engagement with social justice movements as still somehow consonant with those movements relates to their belief that limiting their formal political activities to moments of genuine inspiration is not only consistent with the ethics of self-reliance but essential for making their periods of political action maximally forceful and consequential. That is to say, while all three men affirm the ethic of only serving causes about which one feels a personal, inspired attachment, only Emerson and Thoreau add the supplementary idea that action so practiced will be much more effective. For Emerson, when we act on the basis of personal conviction, our service to others is not only 'indirect' (since we are in fact primarily serving our own individual conscience⁹), but for that reason much more impactful. The 'natural and momentary associations' Emerson supports, which involve impassioned individuals temporarily coming together because they each separately share the same heightened sense of moral conviction, 'doubles or multiplies' the individual's own force, but uninspired service to causes lead to the opposite result: 'In the hour in which [the individual] mortgages himself to two or ten or twenty, he dwarfs himself below the stature of one' (Emerson 2004, 79). Emerson thus refers to the 'loss of truth and power that befalls one who leaves working for himself to work for another. Absolutely speaking, I can work [effectively] only for myself' (Emerson 1959–1972c, 3: 246–47). And he can state the paradox: 'Why have the minority no influence? Because they have not a real minority of one' (Emerson 1995, 83). Thoreau shares this idea of the superiority of indirect service: 'What *good* I do, in the common sense of that word, must be aside from my main path, and for the most part wholly unintended' (Thoreau 2018, 52).¹⁰ Whether Thoreau and especially Emerson thought this consistently is a matter of scholarly debate (e.g. Garvey 2001; Levine and Malachuk 2011; Turner 2009, 155), but the fact that both can even suggest the superior effectivity of indirect service – that Emerson (1971a, 273), for example, can celebrate self-reliant activism as marking a 'new and unprecedented way' of fulfilling social obligations – separates both men from Dylan, who makes no claim that in limiting his social activism to fulfilling his own privately determined sense of conscience he will be doing more good in the world than if he had remained affiliated with formal associations and political movements. In an unpublished 1965 audio interview for *Playboy* with Nat Hentoff, Dylan (1965) both reiterates his general withdrawal from ongoing social movements, but then adds of such political work 'it definitely has to be done', acknowledging that 'people are starving' and 'lots of people are in bad trouble' (ONLINE: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v_4W0tx9be0I, minutes 12–13, 15–16).

In understanding their disengagement from social reform movements as a kind of self-reform, their lack of full commitment to securing others' liberation as being in the name of self-liberation, and their sporadic activity as being more impactful than a more personal but less authentically felt kind of service, Emerson and Thoreau afford themselves a self-satisfaction that Dylan does not share.

3. The self-satisfaction of providentialism

A second source of Emerson and Thoreau's self-satisfaction – which is lacking in Dylan – is that as much as they remain deeply critical of their society, they uphold the world as an ultimately just order, with such justice inscribed in the inherent goodness of human rationality, in nature and in the eventual moral progress of humanity. Emerson, for whom self-reliance is always inseparable from God-reliance, could claim that 'democracy/freedom has its roots in the sacred truth that every man hath in him divine reason' (Emerson 1960–1982, 4:357). This happy 'truth' was the foundation of both the inherent goodness of the human being and the providential faith in the ultimate victory of justice in the world. Whether this providentialism is expressed in unrestrained terms ('the inconsistency of slavery with the principles on which the world is built guarantees its downfall' (Emerson 1995, 87)) or more modestly (the existence in nature of 'a small excess of good, a small balance in brute facts always favourable to the side of reason' (Emerson 1971b, 217)), Emerson can look upon the world as an essentially beautiful and good place. And, crucially, this providentialism allows him to remain morally uplifted even in the periods when he declines to fully devote himself to political causes he deems just. Thus, in an 1852 journal entry explicitly acknowledging how his preference for individual self-cultivation has led to his lack of full engagement in the anti-slavery movement, any sense of remorse is immediately counterbalanced by the solace-giving thought that 'God must govern his own world, & knows his way out of this pit, without my desertion of my post which has none to guard it but me' (Emerson 1977, 13:80).

Emerson's providentialism leads him to some of his most metaphysically speculative ideas. For example, Emerson's notion of compensation, which he especially affirmed in the earlier part of his life, is a complex, multifaceted notion but one which nonetheless allows Emerson to posit two different self-satisfying providential dynamics each of which neutralizes the impact of his political inaction: the equality of human lives (according to which an individual's advantages and deficiencies are offset by each other) and the full operation of justice in the here and now (i.e., the view that 'a perfect equity adjusts its balance in all parts of life' (1903–1904f, 2:102)). At other times, as in Emerson's later essays 'Experience' and 'Fate', there is an acknowledgement of a discrepancy between ideal and actual arrangements, but not without an assertion that the ultimate triumph of justice is inscribed in the very fiber of the universe. In 'Experience', for instance, Emerson admits that 'the world I converse with in the city and in the farms, is not the world I *think*', but can still also conclude:

Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat; up again, old heart! . . . there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize will be the transformation of genius into practical power. (1903–1904g, 3:48–49)

The process of gradual moral progress is itself something for Emerson to celebrate: ‘It is a joyful change to see human nature unshackling herself & asserting her divine origin’ (1960–1982, 1:18). To be sure, Emerson came to see providence as requiring intentional human action for its fruition – ‘I hope we have come to an end of our unbelief, have come to a belief that there is a Divine Providence in the world which will not save us but through our own co-operation’ (1995, 89) – but his idea of providence was sufficiently robust that he could still imagine divine, or *other* human, forces working to accomplish the moral causes from which he periodically withdrew.

Thoreau shares Emerson’s sense that ‘the Universe is not bankrupt’ (Emerson 1995, 36) as well as the idea that this providence lessens the significance of whether any particular individual chooses to fight against injustice:

Probably I should not consciously and deliberately forsake my particular calling to do [instead] the good which society demands of me, to save the universe from annihilation; and I believe that a like but infinitely greater steadfastness elsewhere is all that now preserves it. (Thoreau 2018, 52)

As critical as Thoreau could be of existing politics and states, an underlying faith in the ultimate moral enlightenment of humankind recurs throughout his writing. His essay, ‘Walking’, for example, concludes with the image:

So we saunter toward the Holy Land, till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm and serene and golden as on a bankside in autumn. (2016, 41)

Dylan lacks this providential view of the world and thus also lacks any sense that the non-politically active human being ought to find reassurance on the basis of membership in a fundamentally just cosmic order. While Dylan can occasionally countenance Emerson and Thoreau’s Transcendental quasi-gnostic idea of human participation with divinity, he much more frequently gives voice to the more orthodox Judeo-Christian notion of an absolute ontological separation between human and God and, with it, a pessimism about the human being as a flawed and fallen creature. In a 1983 song, ‘Blind Willie McTell’, on the endurance of racism in America, Dylan (2016, 478) sings:

Well, God is in His heaven
And we all want what’s his
But power and greed and corruptible seed
Seem to be all that there is

With respect to nature, while Dylan is no less aware of the awe natural spaces can evoke – his ‘Lay Down Your Weary Tune’ sings powerfully of the splendour of nature, for example – he does not follow Emerson and Thoreau in treating nature as a mirror of the human being’s own moral potential or as a symbol of what Emerson calls ‘the moral cause of the world’ (Emerson 2003 [1866], 243). If anything, when Dylan treats nature as a mirror, what it reflects back is the human being as a dangerous and unreliable being.

Consider in this regard Dylan's 1963 'Poem to Joanie' which appears to riff off of Whitman's 'A Child says, What is the Grass?' in his *Song of Myself*. Whitman answers the child by treating the grass as the 'flag of my disposition', a mirror of Whitman's own selfhood and, in keeping with the Emersonian tradition, what is reflected in this mirror is imbued with a quasi-divinity, pointing to the elevation and ennoblement of the self: 'hopeful green stuff', 'the handkerchief of the lord', 'a scented gift and remembrance designedly dropt', a 'produced babe', 'a uniform hieroglyphic'. Even the darkest rendering is still affirmative: 'the beautiful uncut hair of graves' (Whitman 1998, 27–28). In Dylan's poem, a child, in contemplating the grass and through the grass himself, savagely rips out the grass, remorsefully acknowledges yet also interrogates his guilt (asking 'how can this bother me?') and then likens himself to a 'frightened fox' and 'a demon child' (Dylan 1963). This is but one example of how Dylan departs from Emerson and Thoreau, the latter of whom, for instance, can conclude and counterbalance his grim castigation of his fellow citizens for their insufficient outrage against slavery in 'Slavery in Massachusetts' by finding promise of redemption in a white water-lily: 'What confirmation of our hopes is in the fragrance of this flower!' (Thoreau 1996c, 135–36).

While Dylan does think that specific local improvements in the social world can be made – at least his own episodic political efforts imply as much – he rejects providentialism, contemplating that the arc of the moral universe either does not exist or tends towards permanent injustice.¹¹ Even if Dylan is less forthcoming than Emerson and Thoreau in expounding this competing, more pessimistic vision, his reticence in this respect itself has theoretical implications insofar as it leads Dylan to refrain from the metaphysical excesses of Emerson and Thoreau when they imagine a divine spark existing within each human being, when they find moral reassurance in natural beauty and when they postulate a divine energy working for the ultimate good of the world. Dylan's conception of self-reliance, and of the problem of a self-reliant individual turning away from the fight against injustice, is simply not buttressed by these speculative, self-congratulating logics. The question at stake is not whether, in the abstract, people in general should be optimistic or pessimistic about the direction of the world, but *for whom* such dispositions are appropriate. Hope means one thing when it inspires a militant fight against injustice, but, as I further explain in the concluding section, threatens callousness and complacency in a context of inaction.

4. The self-satisfaction of considering oneself not complicit with injustice

A third aspect differentiating Dylan from Emerson and Thoreau on the issue of self-satisfaction has to do with whether self-reliant individuals are, in the period of their withdrawal from causes they are sympathetic to, complicit with injustice. Emerson and Thoreau contemplate their non-complicity in a manner totally lacking for Dylan.

In the case of Thoreau, however much he insists that there is no duty to combat injustice, he nonetheless affirms, often in the same breath, a duty to extricate oneself from injustice and thus the possibility of achieving non-complicity with it:

It is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support. (Thoreau 1996b, 7)

Much of Thoreau's activism is connected to just this extrication (i.e., forswearing allegiance to the state by not voting, not paying taxes, living off the land, calling the constitution evil). While Emerson does not countenance such wholesale withdrawal, he himself entertains a similar lack of personal complicity with injustice (especially regarding non-slavery issues) by constantly referring to *distance*, both spatial and spiritual, as a barrier to his own moral culpability. Part of what makes Emerson's opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law perhaps his most impassioned political cause is its *proximity* to his home in Concord, Massachusetts, as the law required that Emerson and his neighbours actively assist the capture and punishment of runaway slaves. By contrast, the causes about which Emerson wavers or refuses allegiance – such as an 'obligation put all poor men in good situations' or the 'tenderness for black folk a thousand miles off' – are often characterized by a distance which seems to negate his sense of responsibility: 'I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent, I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong' (Emerson 1971a, 262). Relatedly, at certain points in his life, Emerson also expresses the view that clear thinking about a political question – establishing, as an intellectual matter, its rectitude or injustice – marks the extent of one's moral obligation, since no person can be expected to actively contribute to more than a small number of concerns.¹²

As much as Dylan confidently refuses dutiful service to otherwise just causes, there is nothing in his poetry or public statements that suggests a similar disclaiming of complicity with suffering or injustice, whether near to home or anywhere in the world. Dylan does not say with Emerson 'Are they my poor?' And he does not follow Thoreau's provocatively reductive morality: 'Rescue the drowning and tie your shoe-strings. Take your time, and set about some free labor' (2018, 56). Perhaps the difference is historical. In the 19th century, distant ills were, in three different ways, more distant than those today: they were often not known until long after their actual occurrence, they were less susceptible of being aided by would-be helpers from far away and they were not obviously caused by actions from those remotely situated. Today, all three aspects have changed, as we can witness distant suffering in real time, transportation and communication technologies make immediate aid an almost ever-present possibility, and globalization has the effect that it is more plausible to see far-off suffering (such as environmental degradation) as being connected to actions closer to home. For these and related reasons, Peter Singer (2009) among others, turning Thoreau's metaphor on its head, argues that our responsibility to eradicate global poverty – 'to put all poor in good situations' – is equivalent to our responsibility to rescue a child drowning before our eyes. Whether Dylan's unwillingness to deny his complicity stems from this type of thinking is unclear, but what is straightforward is that however much he would like to follow Emerson's (2017c, 81) threefold dictum – 'Speak as you think, be what you are, pay your debts of all kinds' – the last of these is something he never claims to do.¹³ In 'It's Alright Ma', for example, Dylan rejects what he calls 'waterfalls of pity', not

because he lacks complicity but because pity breeds conformity and thus undermines responsibility to his own unique individual identity: ‘Watch waterfalls of pity roar / You feel to moan but unlike before / You discover that you’d just be one more / Person crying’ (Dylan 2016, 156).

Evidence of Dylan’s divergent attitude towards his own complicity can be found not only in the way he conceives of his inaction, but in the way he makes sense of his periods of political activity as well. Dylan shares with Emerson and Thoreau the view that self-reliant individuals ideally should engage in social justice as *individuals*, cooperating with others only when temporarily and contingently side by side with like-minded others and thus not beholden to larger, more permanent organizational machines. But Dylan departs from Emerson and Thoreau not only because, as I have discussed, he refuses himself the comforting thought that self-reliant activism of this kind is more effective than submission to the strictures of organization, but also because the coalition of self-reliant individuals he imagines has the purpose not simply of combatting injustice but of reminding individuals that, even when they support just causes, their hands are unlikely to be clean. In a 1964 ‘apology’ letter to the ECLC, at whose 1963 award dinner Dylan received the Tom Paine Award but caused an uproar given his controversial criticism of the attendees, Dylan insists that the proper mindset of any engaged set of individuals is for each to resist the thought that society as a whole is to blame for various social ills and recognize instead a more direct personal culpability:

I am sick
 so sick
 at hearin ‘we all share the blame’ for every
 church bombing, gun battle, mine disaster,
 poverty explosion, an president killing that
 comes about.
 it is so easy t say ‘we’ an bow our heads together
 I must say ‘I’ alone an bow my head alone . . .
 yes if there’s violence in the times then
 there must be violence in me . . .
 once this is straight between us, it’s then an
 only then that we can say ‘we’ an really mean
 it . . . an go on from there t do something about
 It. (quoted in Lamont, 2000–2018)

Dylan’s greater openness to his complicity with injustice is also probably shaped by his refusal to characterize those political causes he does support as somehow uniquely urgent and as thus making up for all the other kinds of political and social responsibilities he does not take up. As much as Emerson inveighs against reformers who pursue a single issue and thus falsely imbue their single cause with an undeserved totality of importance,¹⁴ the fact is that his own engagement with anti-slavery often took this form. He describes the issue that most spurred him to political action, the Fugitive Slave Law, as the ‘most detestable law that was ever enacted by a civilized state’ (1960–1982, 11:352) and could treat it as a singular benchmark of morality, claiming in 1851 that if resistance

to this law ‘is not right, there is no right’ (1903–1904a, 11:186–87). Perhaps if Dylan had lived in the time of American slavery he would have done the same, but the truth remains that Dylan does not allow himself the self-satisfaction of treating the causes he does endorse as morally superior to the ones he does not and, in his song ‘Tangled Up in Blue’, depicts a situation in which a would-be reformer has to face a world in which slavery (and, by extension, the singular urgency this evil can evoke) does not exist:

I lived with them on Montague Street
 In a basement down the stairs
 There was snow all winter and no heat
 Revolution was in the air
 Then one day all his slaves ran free
 Something inside of him died
 The only thing I could do was be me
 And get on that train and ride.¹⁵

The possessive ‘*his* slaves’ refers here not to a slaveholder but to an activist; and thus the liberation of these slaves itself indicates not emancipation per se but a circumstance in which the activist has lost some kind of orientation. Perhaps Dylan means to depict a situation in which political success – the achievement of liberation, justice and so on – has drained the one-time activist of purpose. But given Dylan’s obvious appreciation for the endurance of injustice in the world (including, sadly, the persistence of slavery in some quarters), what seems more likely is that Dylan here is describing a situation in which the political reformer (with whom he has ‘lived’ and by extension has been¹⁶) has lost, not any kind of political purpose, but the sense of a specific political purpose being universal (i.e., being singularly urgent and thus superior to all other moral objectives). Without the self-satisfaction of conceiving of the causes one does work towards as being morally higher than those one does not, the self-reliant individual cannot so easily avoid a sense of complicity in this latter regard.

Refusing to disclaim complicity with ongoing injustice need not demoralize an enduring commitment to social change, but it does prevent self-reliant individuals, in the moments of their disengagement, from imagining that they have somehow extricated themselves from responsibility for the persistence of injustice. Part of Dylan’s lack of self-satisfaction stems from this uneasy recognition.

5. The propriety of self-reliance without self-satisfaction

In addition to its status as a specifically democratic form of individualism, one of the main reasons to take seriously the idea of self-reliance, I have argued, is that the tradition of philosophizing the meaning of self-reliance is instructive about the situation of turning away from participation in social justice movements in the name of a free use of one’s individuality. Emerson, Thoreau and Dylan not only are uncommonly explicit about a circumstance that no doubt applies to many present-day liberal-democratic citizens – inaction with regard to otherwise endorsed social movements – but, in offering divergent understandings of this situation, in effect historicize self-reliance, demonstrate that it has

alternate variants, and thereby raise the question of which variant is most suitable today. Emerson and Thoreau, it must be admitted, articulate with unrivalled eloquence the claims of selfhood that lead them away from being dependable political agents, but Dylan's less self-satisfied form of self-reliance, even if it is terser, has clear epistemological, ethical and political advantages.

Epistemologically, Emerson and Thoreau's relative self-satisfaction regarding their periods of withdrawal is not simply a matter of psychological disposition, but stems from their adherence to various metaphysical ideas – such as the Transcendental notion that the self is always the potential vehicle of a universal luminosity, the related idea that mind and nature are ultimately mirror reflections of each other, the notion of divine providence and an interpretation of their literary work as a kind of internal liberation – that cannot easily survive contemporary postmetaphysical scepticism. In translating self-reliance from a Transcendentalist to a more existentialist register, Dylan has fewer presuppositions and thus models self-reliance in a manner likely to have broader appeal to citizens of a wide-range of diverse perspectives and standpoints.

Of course, this epistemological modesty has ethical consequences. In dispensing with the speculative features of Emerson and Thoreau's philosophy of self-reliance, Dylan also treats self-reliant withdrawal from political action as a more serious ethical problem. Even if Emerson and Thoreau repeatedly examine and personally acknowledge their lack of full support for causes they deem to be just, the effect of their three forms of self-satisfaction that I have outlined is to de-problematize their inaction, that is to diminish its status as a fraught moral dilemma. Dylan, by contrast, because he lacks self-satisfaction regarding his self-reliant withdrawal from social justice movements, suggests that in fact the matter is vexing and not entirely soluble. In other words, if Emerson and Thoreau can find in their self-reliance the harmonization of duty to self and duty to others, Dylan articulates and performs a self-reliance characterized by a dissonance between these two duties. When Dylan's individualism leads him away from active support of causes he knows to be just, he is much more ready to acknowledge that this withdrawal has moral costs.

This acknowledgement of moral costs need not do fatal damage to the appeal of self-reliance, as some like George Kateb have worried, but rather has the potential to clarify and update the ethical meaning of self-reliance within the conditions of the 21st century in which moral responsibility for distant suffering, the technology to alleviate that suffering should there be political will to do so, and arguably the raw magnitude of suffering itself are unprecedentedly extensive. Kateb, in the conclusion to his book *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, which celebrates self-reliance as an ethical ideal for a contemporary liberal-democratic society, is aware of these conditions, but understands them as 'the great obstacle to finding self-reliance a genuine ideal' (2002, 198). Kateb acknowledges that what seems to differentiate Emerson and Thoreau's time from our own is the much greater possibility that 'atrocities [has become] the norm' (2002, 198). Whereas slavery could be seen as an exceptional and aberrant mark upon an otherwise 'preponderantly benign' (2002, 199) 19th-century world, the present is characterized by a dramatically heightened sense of disorder and injustice (intensified by the technologies that make amelioration of them all the more possible as well). Specifically, Kateb refers to such contemporary pathologies as 'mass wars', 'extermination camps', 'millions and

millions of human beings living in inhuman conditions', 'the deliberate infliction of suffering on a large scale' and a 'quantity of material misery that is scarcely imaginable' (2002, 198).

Such conditions are potentially devastating to self-reliance, Kateb thinks, because he believes that a prerequisite of self-reliance being an attractive ideal is what he calls 'innocence': both in the form of a world that is mostly good and in the form of the clear conscience of individuals practicing the cultivation of individuality over and against the claims of organized reform movements. In the absence of innocence, Kateb fears that self-reliance becomes 'only a guilty luxury', 'culpably indifferent', and thus 'impossible to defend' (2002, 200). As a result of this manner of thinking, Kateb – who *is* after all defending the ethic of self-reliance – is led to sidestep and diminish the very premise from which he begins: the existence of significant evil in the world which would appear to demand 'enlistment in a mobilized and full-time cause' and, thus, to override self-reliance (2002, 200). This sidestepping takes numerous forms, including the conjecture that maybe it is 'only an unhelpful exaggeration . . . [to] say that the world's condition is largely evil' (2002, 200); the suggestion that intermittent suspension of self-reliance in the name of social justice work may ultimately be consonant with self-reliance since such suspension provides experiences from which to grow and learn about oneself (which ignores the problem as Kateb has framed it, namely the need for '*mobilized and full-time*' political engagement); the notion that insofar as we believe that humanity should continue to exist we should endorse self-reliant individualism, as the flowering of humanity, too; and, finally, the idea that because self-reliance is the authentic ethic of democracy we should affirm self-reliance in order to affirm democracy itself. These ideas may persuasively explain Kateb's enduring attraction to the ideal of self-reliance, but they fail to respond to the very issue Kateb has introduced: how to reconcile self-reliance with the condition that atrocity has become the norm in the world (2002, 200–202).

Rather than restore self-reliance to a condition to innocence, the virtue of Dylan's contribution is that it models what self-reliance becomes when such innocence has been lost. It is simply not true that individuals need to feel innocent in order to practice the values of self-reliance. The ideal is sufficiently attractive, both in its substance and its genuine connection to liberal democracy, that it continues to motivate adherence even in the ethically fraught circumstances of the 21st century. Kateb himself admits that even today 'most people, including myself, live life as they please' (2002, 201). Kateb's mistake is to insist on finding resources by which to 'give myself a reprieve' for his continual support of self-reliance (2002, 201). The real problem is not that individuals will lose their taste for the free use of their individuality – for nonconformity, creativity, self-expression and duty to one's innermost convictions – in the absence of such a reprieve, but that the experience of such individuality cannot be experienced as a universal or otherwise perfect value when practiced within a context understood to be characterized by gross, pervasive, correctible injustice. Dylan testifies both to the enduring appeal of self-reliance in the face of such conditions (he is hardly a less effective ambassador for self-reliant individualism than Emerson and Thoreau, despite his attunement to the non-innocence of it) and yet also to how the practice of self-reliance becomes altered within such a landscape. Properly understood, self-reliance is *an* ethic of liberal-

democratic society, but it is not the exclusive one. There is a competing liberal-democratic ethic of working to improve the lot of people whose unjust suffering and oppression precludes them from a life of self-reliance. Dylan's refusal to deny that his periods of political withdrawal are complicit with the persistence of injustice does not lead him to accept a state of total guilt, but it does mean that he recognizes that there is an inescapable trade-off within a liberal democracy between practicing the self-reliant individuality it makes possible for some and actively struggling to enable the self-reliant individuality currently denied to others. This trade-off does not altogether destroy self-reliance as an ideal, but it does require that self-reliance not be treated as pure or perfectible. Kateb thinks that self-reliance cannot stand in the face of an almost infinite debt to the broader community, when in truth the problem is that we are the bearers of two duties – to self and to other – which cannot be fully harmonized. But their not being fully harmonizable does not negate the importance of either.

The political upshot of Dylan's lack of self-satisfaction in his self-reliance is that he is much more aware than Emerson and Thoreau of his positionality (how his self-reliance is a product of privilege unavailable to others) and that this awareness makes him more respectful of both the urgency of the social reform he disclaims and the individuals devoting themselves to it. Emerson and Thoreau, by contrast, evince a more persistent and pronounced tendency to diminish the work of the reform movements in which they elect not to fully invest themselves. This diminishment, which is not of course the same as outright rejection, can be seen most clearly in Emerson and Thoreau's repeated challenge to what they see as *mere* moral goodness (defined as selfless devotion to helping others). When Emerson states, 'Your goodness must have some edge to it, – else it is none' (Emerson 1971a, 252) – and when Thoreau similarly exhorts his readers, 'Aim above morality. Be not *simply* good – be good for something' (2013, 362) – they do not simply enunciate the view (shared by Dylan) that they wish to limit *their own* social action to situations where it is interwoven with a personal sense of conscience and vocation, but (unlike Dylan) imply that a more sacrificial and selfless kind of political engagement is spiritually and ethically lesser. Whereas Thoreau, for instance, can take pride in his restriction of activism to situations in which he has a personal investment – quipping, in respect to his disengagement, 'I never heard of a philanthropic meeting in which it was sincerely proposed to do any good to me, or the like of me' (Thoreau 2018, 53) – Dylan recognizes there is indeed a vital place for selflessness. It is not that Thoreau rejects selflessness altogether, but that he depreciates it in a twofold way, imagining that its proper function is limited to face-to-face emergencies and claiming that efforts to respond to such emergencies – because they stem from a supposedly automatic, obvious, not even specifically human instinct, in which the performance of one's distinct individuality plays no role – are inferior to a more self-directed (i.e., vocational and personally inspired) form of ethical action. Both of these kinds of depreciation are expressed when Thoreau writes:

A man is not a good man to me because he will feed me if I should be starving, or warm me if I should be freezing, or pull me out of a ditch if I should ever fall into one. I can find you a Newfoundland dog that will do as much. (Thoreau 2018, 53)

Dylan, who seems to understand that contemporary individuals are implicated in emergencies that are vast and global, does not treat the moral goodness of those who respond to them as being in any way lesser to other forms of action.

Emerson and Thoreau's relative diminishment of the work of social reform is also reflected in their more frequent attack on politics itself, with Emerson confessing that for him public life often seems 'odious and hurtful' (1995, 73) and Thoreau describing political functions as something 'vital' yet also 'trivial' and thus as '*infra*-human, a kind of vegetation . . . [which] should be unconsciously performed, like the corresponding functions of the physical body' (1996d, 120). Even if this is not a consistent position for either of them, it is given voice by them much more frequently than it is for Dylan.¹⁷ Similarly, Emerson and Thoreau can worry about the excessiveness of certain reform ambitions, with Emerson invoking the example of a naked New Zealander" as being in no better or worse condition than a 'well-clad, reading, writing, thinking American, with a watch, a pencil and a bill of exchange in his pocket' (1971a, 279) and Thoreau reporting that every time he was persuaded by reformers to take a greater interest in the poor and aim to maintain 'certain poor people in all respects as comfortably as I maintain myself', these so-called poor declined and 'one and all unhesitatingly preferred to remain poor' (Thoreau 2018, 52). Dylan is aware of the ostensibly equivalent problem that any specific reform objective can crowd out attention to other reform goals that are just as significant – he laments, for example, that leading civil rights organizations of the 1960s did not address the plight of 'junkies, all of them poor . . . they need freedom as much as anybody else, and what's anybody doing for *them*?' (quoted in Hentoff 2017 [1964], 29) – but he does not suggest that the causes that are focused upon are somehow less urgent or valuable than the ones that are not.

What underlies Emerson and Thoreau's greater tendency to diminish the work of social reformers is their view, entirely lacking in Dylan, that self-reform is often a superior substitute – or necessary prerequisite – for social and political reform. The lack of self-satisfaction in Dylan's self-reliance makes him utterly unable to share Emerson's claim that 'society gains nothing whilst a man, not himself renovated, attempts to renovate things around him' (2004, 77), nor Thoreau's parallel assertion: 'The true reform can be undertaken any morning before unbarring our doors. It calls no convention. I can do two thirds the reform of the world myself' (1981, 1:247). Even if Dylan agrees with Emerson and Thoreau that reformers who lack a personal vocation may turn out to be hypocrites – concealing behind their apparent philanthropy mere spiritual emptiness or, worse, an all-too-familiar socioeconomic ambition – he cannot endorse Thoreau's extreme statement that 'there is no odor so bad as that which arises from goodness tainted' (Thoreau 2018, 53). The work that Dylan disclaims is understood by him to be too valuable to diminish even its half-hearted agents. Whereas Emerson can declare, 'Accept the reforms but accept not the person of the reformer' (Emerson 1959–1972a, 3:260), Dylan understands that this proposed differentiation, and the diminishment of full-time reformers it implies, is neither possible nor desirable within the contemporary context. To be sure, in the case of at least Emerson there are moments when something like Dylan's less self-satisfied form of self-reliance – and its deference to the reformers who are not joined – seems to be shared, as when in declining to live on Brook Farm he writes, 'I have decided not to join it and yet very slowly and I may almost say


penitentially' (1997, 244) or when he confesses: 'When a zealot comes to me & represents the importance of this Temperance Reform my hands drop – I have no excuse – I honor him with shame at my own inaction' (1960–1982, 5:437). But these are exceptions, not entirely free from irony, and dwarfed by opposing sentiments such as Emerson's suggestion that his writing might be a worthy compensation for the political action he forgoes.¹⁸ Because Dylan is more aware of the contingency and good fortune by which he has achieved self-reliance, he is more respectful of the permanent need to fight injustice in its various forms.

Seen biographically, the value of Dylan's variant of self-reliance is harder to perceive, since Emerson and Thoreau contributed if anything more time and energy to the fight against injustice than Dylan. But viewed ideologically, the distinct perspective on self-reliance that Dylan represents – with its epistemological, ethical and political departures from the Emersonian and Thoreauvian tradition – provides a more honest account of what a life of self-reliance actually entails, the moral costs of this life, and the proper attitude by which these costs should be borne within a liberal-democratic culture affirming free and equal citizenship for all. For those of us whose own self-reliant individualism leads us to turn our backs to injustice, Dylan provides a more worthy example of how to do so.

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ORCID iD

Jeffrey Edward Green  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4426-0616>

Notes

1. For the latter of these: 'But all this is very selfish, I have heard some of my townsmen say. I confess that I have hitherto indulged very little in philanthropic enterprises. I have made some sacrifices to a sense of duty, and among others have sacrificed this pleasure also' (Thoreau, 2018, 52). For the former, see Rosenblum (1996, xviii).
2. For one thing, it is doubly outside the rubric of so-called ideal theory (which addresses the institutions, duties and social arrangements constitutive of a just society). It is not just that Emerson, Thoreau and Dylan wrestle with how much of their time to devote to remedying situations of gross *injustice*, in which their efforts might marginally improve some victims' lives within a condition of emergency. Beyond this, the problem lived and explored by the

three is outside of ideal theory because it concerns not the *content* of justice, but the level of *commitment* to justice however it may be construed. There is of course disagreement about how to define social justice in a liberal-democratic society and, by extension, about the extent of social responsibilities a relatively secure citizen owes to those who are vulnerable, needy and oppressed. Libertarians, social democrats and liberal socialists, for instance, offer distinct accounts about what a political order owes to its citizens; and within each paradigm there is debate about how territorial borders further impact the meaning of social justice (see, e.g., Moore 2015; Stilz 2009). However, no matter which philosophy a well-off and secure liberal-democratic citizen intellectually adopts, there is still the question of how willing this citizen is to act on the basis of it. And it is this often-forgotten issue – not the tension between competing philosophies but the tension between one’s individuality and the requirements of social justice, however how one chooses to define it – that is given such powerful voice and consideration by the great thinkers of self-reliance. When one considers that the project of realizing liberal democracy is at present sufficiently unachieved so that *any* philosophy of liberal-democratic justice, including libertarian ones (see, e.g. Tomasi 2012), places demands on citizens to advocate significant social reforms, the question explored by Emerson, Thoreau and Dylan – how committed a relatively free individual ought to be to his or her political commitments – has an almost palpable salience.

3. In treating these three thinkers as reflective of a common unwillingness to consistently devote themselves to causes they understand to be just, I thus follow in the tradition of scholarship that has noted that the self-reliant individualism underlying each man’s political thought cannot be entirely assimilated into conventional norms of democratic citizenship (e.g. Kateb 2002, 173, 178; Jenco 2003, 77; Marqusee, 2003, 105; Read, 2011, 161; Rosenblum, 1996, vii, xviii). But rather than interpret this problematic in merely biographical terms, noting contrasting period’s in each man’s activism (e.g. Gougeon, 2001), or as calling into question democracy itself (Jenco 2003), I employ it to explain the specific and understudied dynamic of social justice movements, in which the tension at play is not macroscopic and general (how to reconcile self-reliant individualism with political and legal obligation as such) but the more targeted question of how to reconcile self-reliant individualism with obligation to those whose suffering from injustice might be abated by one’s political actions.
4. When Emerson criticizes creeds as a ‘disease of the intellect’ (1971a, 263) he has in mind those who ‘talk as Americans, as Republicans . . . [so that] each cunningly hides under these wearisome commonplaces the character and flavor that can really make him interesting and valuable to us. Of course, he only half acts, – talks with his lips and not his heart’ (Emerson 1903–1904b, 7: 431). There is no such half-action for self-reliant individualists; and the individualism and democracy that underlie self-reliance are thus not themselves properly understood as creeds in the sense criticized by Emerson.
5. Baez (1987, 72) reports that Dylan often referred to her as ‘Ramona’ and that they debated the importance of serving in movement politics (95).
6. I elaborate the specifics of Dylan’s view here in section 4 below.
7. King (1986, 295) thus criticizes the moderate ‘who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can’t agree with your methods of direct action”’; who paternalistically feels he can set the timetable

for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a "more convenient season".

8. Thoreau, it is true, comes close to Dylan when, in his account of his refusal of the offer to live on Brook Farm, writes in his journal: 'As for these communities, I think I had rather keep bachelor's hall in hell than go to board in heaven'. But Thoreau ends up falling back on his usual logic of morally justifying his non-participation by suggesting he would become less virtuous in such collective communities: 'Do you think your virtue will be boarded with you? It will never live on the interest of your money, depend upon it'. Accordingly, his provocative hypothesis of preferring a single-room in hell is immediately softened, if not altogether neutralized, by the contrasting image of his anticipating a single-room in heaven: 'In heaven I hope to bake my own bread and clean my own linen' (1981, 1:227).
9. 'Gift is contrary to the law of the universe. Serving others is serving us. I must absolve me to myself. "Mind thy affair," says the spirit: – "coxcomb, would you meddle with the skies, or with other people?" Indirect service is left' (Emerson 1971c, 617–18; also see 1959–1972c, 3:246–47).
10. Thoreau also reflects the idea of indirect service when he writes: 'Be sure that you give the poor the aid they most need, though it be your example which leaves them far behind' (2018, 52).
11. Consider the statement of Joan Baez: 'I asked him what made us different, and he said it was simple, that I thought I could change things, and he knew that no one could' (Baez 1987, 95). Such a viewpoint does not lead Dylan to diminish social reformers, but as I explain in the concluding section actually contributes to his enduring respect for the social justice work he disclaims.
12. Consider Emerson's comment in 1837 regarding abolition, following the visit of abolitionists Angelina and Sarah Grimke to Concord: 'When we have settled the right and wrong of this question I think we have done all we can. A man can only extend his active attention to a certain finite amount of claims' (1960–1982, 12:154).
13. If anything Dylan is aware of an abiding guilt. In his follow-up to the ECLC award, whose fundraising he disturbed, Dylan admits he has 'a moral debt' to the organization – 'I have a hatred of debts and want to be even in the best way I can' – but he does not seem to have rectified the situation nor claimed to have (quoted in Lamont 2000–2018). And in his 1966 song 'Visions of Johanna', Dylan juxtaposes a 'fiddler's' claim that debts have been paid to the singer's own sense that they have not: 'The fiddler, he now steps to the road / He writes ev'rything's been returned which was owed / On the back of the fish truck that loads / While my conscience explodes' (Dylan 2016, 194).
14. Emerson can thus challenge single-issue reformers: 'Do not be so vain of your one objection. Do you think there is only one?' (Emerson 2004, 77).
15. This version is a 1984 live performance (quoted in Mitchell 2011, 43). The original version, released on *Blood on the Tracks* (1975), has a slightly different verse:

I lived with them on Montague Street
 In a basement down the stairs
 There was music in the cafés at night
 And revolution in the air
 Then he started into dealing with slaves
 And something inside of him died
 She had to sell everything she owned
 And froze up inside (Dylan 2016, 332).

16. For Dylan, first-person and third-person narratives often fluctuate even if they refer to the same individual. With regard to the song quoted here, ‘Tangled Up in Blue’, Dylan (1985) is explicit in his acknowledgement of this: ‘I was just trying to make it like a painting where you can see the different parts but then you also see the whole of it. With that particular song, that’s what I was trying to do . . . with the concept of time, and the way the characters change from the first person to the third person, and you’re never quite sure if the third person is talking or the first person is talking. But as you look at the whole thing, it really doesn’t matter’.
17. Dylan, it is true, in his 1963 address to the ECLC states that he aims to abandon the very concepts of political analysis (e.g. the left vs. right continuum) in favour of the profoundly apolitical contrast between ‘up wing’ and ‘down wing’: ‘There’s only up and down, and down is very close to the ground. And I’m trying to go up without thinking about anything trivial, such as politics’ (quoted in Drier 2011; also see Dylan 1964). But this is an exception; Dylan’s frustration with political life, compared to that of Emerson or Thoreau, is much less often manifested in this kind of devaluation of politics and, by extension, of the work of social justice activists.
18. ‘I have been writing with some pains Essays on various matters as a sort of apology to my country for my apparent idleness’ (1960–1982, 7:404–5). Note here Emerson’s refusal to fully acknowledge his political inaction, speaking of only his ‘apparent’ idleness.

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