Abstract
According to Emerson's theory of representative democracy, one aspect of the structure of the public sphere is the prevalence of representative individuals in it. Representative individuals in the public sphere are analogous to representatives in the institutional sphere. They make present in public the values present in their “constituencies.” They deliberate in the name of their constituencies, saying what their constituencies could say, were they to also directly engage in such deliberations. Representative individuals are tied to their constituencies through bonds of “sympathy and likeness.” The moral consequences of a representative public sphere include the development of a sense of deliberative justice on the part of the citizenry, and the reduction of the possibility of domination by ideologically oriented elites.
Introduction

Political participation on a wide basis is one of the hallmarks of democracy. The idea of participation invokes a commitment to the sovereignty of the people, usually in their incarnation as the electorate. Emerson, like most democrats, accepts that one of the bases of democratic political life is the sense of belonging and individual empowerment that comes from what Thomas Jefferson called being “a participator in government.” (Arendt 1963, 256) The value at the heart of Emerson’s conception of democracy is the ability of all persons to shape their lives through rational deliberation, to exercise their capacity for self-government. On Emerson’s view, participation in politics is, to a significant degree, participation in public deliberation of political issues. Deliberation, which occurs primarily in the public sphere, is not simply the assertion of individual preferences, moderated perhaps by a process of bargaining over predetermined interests such as is often encountered in legislative settings. In a deliberative democracy citizens attempt to change each other’s minds, to influence and persuade using reasoned argument and evidence. Emerson concludes that citizenship in a democracy rests on the possibility of participating in such deliberations. But the opportunity, and even the very possibility, of participation in the governing process seems threatened under the conditions of mass society. The danger to participatory self-government is that most citizens will fail to participate even after the political and social restrictions of participation have been lessened and removed.

Thus, Emerson suggests, participation in deliberations in the public sphere, like participation in legislative bodies, typically can not be direct. Just as representatives mediate participation in the branches of government, so too does public discourse center around representative individuals who stake out positions and provide focal points for
public debate and deliberation. Emerson emends the theory of political representation so that it applies both to electoral institutions and throughout the public sphere of a democratic society. Emerson’s solution to the problem of mass participation in large democracies is found in the representative public sphere. Emerson develops this idea by outlining the role of “representatives of opinion,” or simply “representative men” in the formation of a public sphere. In a mass society, citizens appear to one another by means of representation within the world of the media and political actions. He conceptualizes public relations in democracies outside of institutional settings as also filled with representatives—individuals who represent the values, ways of life, and identities present in their communities.

Emerson develops a concept of representation in the public sphere on the basis of the analogy of discursive politics with institutional politics. He writes, “The learned member of the legislature, at Westminster, or at Washington, speaks and votes for thousands…As Sir Robert Peel and Mr. Webster vote, so Locke and Rousseau think for thousands.” (715) Such a representative individual in the public sphere, “stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the common-wealth.” (448) Emerson’s theory of representative individuals in the public sphere reflects the indispensability of the public sphere to democratic politics in a mass society with broad participation in electoral politics. It also reflects the changing character of the public sphere (mirroring the changing nature of institutionalized politics): in a democratic polity, the public sphere become at once more inclusive and democratic, and more mediated and less direct.

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1 The theme of representative public identities runs through Emerson’s writings, from the early addresses of the 1830’s to the late volume Society and Solitude (1870). All quotations of Emerson’s works are from Ralph Waldo Emerson, Essays and Lectures, (New York: The Library of America, 1983) unless otherwise noted.
The first section of this paper gives an overview of Emerson’s account of the importance of representative individuals in structuring the public sphere. It is the representative individual who synthesizes and gives some unity to the disparate values, beliefs and desires that underlay public opinion. Section two develops Emerson’s analogy between representatives in institutional settings and in the public sphere. The emphasis is on how representatives can be said to think of speak for others, and on what connections there are between these representatives and their constituencies. The paper concludes by expanding on the moral distinctiveness of representative democracy by canvassing the political evils that Emerson says representation can ameliorate.

I. Representative Individuals Structure the Public Sphere

Emerson extends the concept of political representation from the institutional setting in which it was born into the public sphere. He does this to accommodate the new political conditions of a democracy in which the seat of sovereignty has migrated from the institutions of government to the people. The concept of representative public sphere shifts the focus of representation from the delegative relations between citizens and their government to the deliberative relations among citizens in the public sphere.

The concept of representation that is prevalent in Anglo-American thought up until the democratic revolution in America stresses the relationship between a people (or the politically significant classes or interests of a people) and its government. According to this concept of representation, the people are represented to their government. Harvey Mansfield illuminates the pre-democratic roots of this conception of representation in his distinction between medieval and modern representation. “Therefore medieval
representation was “dualistic” or “en face.” The English king faced the people’s representatives because he was not a member of the people himself...modern representatives in their private capacity are mere members of the people that first consent to government.” (79-80) Hobbes, Locke, and Burke, for example, all assume that the location of the fundamental political relationship is between the people and the government.²

The democratic doctrine of the sovereignty of the people requires Emerson to account for the fact that the people are being represented to themselves. Democratic elections express the will of the people to the people. In the public sphere, i.e., in all manner of media, citizens are represented to themselves.³ This representation gives citizens a public presence that they would otherwise lack amid the overwhelmingly large numbers that populate democratic nations. The “republican form of government” guaranteed in the Constitutions is extended to the public sphere, where Emerson’s “representative of opinions” and “representative men” act to constitute the people, and amend this constitution by working to “revise and enlarge” the people.

This extension of the idea of representation from the offices of government into “the people” is already hinted in the republican ideal of political representation. Emerson’s extension of representative relations into the public sphere preserves and transposes the republican ideal into a democratic context. Republicans argued that communities must be represented by individuals who resembled their constituents:

² Hanna Pitkin (1967) follows the lead of Hobbes and Burke in locating representation exclusively in institutional settings. Her influence has helped keep the focus of work on representation on its institutional variants.

³ This distinction between institutional and public sphere representation points to the existence of two distinct concepts of political representation in the contemporary political science and theory literature. One the one hand, there is the kind of ‘representation’ a representative in congress or on a school board provides his constituents, and on the other there is the kind of ‘representation’ a group or ‘type’ of people (distinguished by e.g., race, ethnicity, sex and gender, class or religion) receives in the media. Currently, the different literatures that use these concepts of representation do not much intertwine, however.
farmers by farmers, townsfell by townsfell. This ensures that they possess “the same
interests, feelings, opinions, and views the people themselves would were they all
assembled.”

This ideal is clearly echoed in Emerson’s claim that representative earns
the “fellowship and trust” of his community as a result of his “sympathy and likeness” to
it. The extension of this ideal to the public sphere may be the only way that it could
continue to have a place in democratic societies. Institutional pressures seem to bear out
Hamilton’s prediction that “the idea of an actual representation of all classes of the
people by persons of each class is altogether visionary.” (214) Other pressures ensured
that the harmony of interests that republican representation was supposed to produce was
often glaringly absent. The republican ideal is only preserved in a transfigured form in
the politics of the public sphere, where the harmony of interests between representatives
and their constituencies arise naturally.

Emerson presents representative individuality as an important element of our
cognitive organization of the political and social world. Emerson’s basic insight is that
“Person are the world to persons.” (Nature, 154) When a political group or movement is
apprehended, it appears as it is represented by a personality. The centrality of the
individual in Emerson’s thought thus marks not only his emphasis on the moral worth
and social distinctiveness of the individual. The individual is also that which gives shape
to what is public and common. This is because, as he writes, “A man is a method, a
progressive arrangement; a selecting principle, gathering his like to him, wherever he

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4 From the “Letter from the Federal Farmer” dated October 9, 1787. It continues: “…a fair representation, therefore, should be so regulated, that every order of men in the community, according to the common course of elections, can have a share in it—in order to allow professional men, merchants, traders, farmers, mechanics, etc. to bring a just proportion of their best informed men respectively into the legislature…” (Ketcham 265)
The conglomeration of opinions and values only cohere into possibilities for action in individuals who, through what Emerson calls their “pictorial” quality, give them a visible unity. He writes,

The universal does not attract us until housed in an individual. Who heeds the waste abyss of possibility? The ocean is everywhere the same, but it has no character until seen with the shore or the ship…So must we admire in man, the form of the formless, the concentration of the vast, the house of reason, the cave of memory.

In the political realm, “Person are the world to persons,” means that living political ideals have the shape of a personality. We apprehend the political landscape through the unifying force of representative individuals, whose personalities give shape to ideas, beliefs, and desires and transform them into political phenomenon. The sphere of ideas only becomes public through individuals who are able to be representative of political options and possibilities. There may be many possible political positions; but there are only as many political positions as have been given expression and expounded upon by some individual. This does not mean that citizens cannot apprehend systems of thought or structures in society and politics. Ideologies do form. But they form, Emerson says, not spontaneously out of material conditions, but out of the pens and the mouths of individuals. Ideologies coalesce in the wake of individuals, but even if they continue to have an effect for beyond the name of that individual, the unity and coherence they exhibit will be that of the personality of their originator or their translator.

Emerson’s position is more radical than Matthiessen’s summary of the relation between the individual and society, which is that, “no individual is great except through

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5 “Spiritual Laws,” Essays, 311.
the general.”” Individuality as such, in so far as it is “public,” and not only ‘greatness’, is only possible through the general. “Each individual soul is such [either a “demon or god”].” Emerson claims, “in virtue of its being a power to translate the world into some particular language of its own; if not into a picture, a statue, or a dance, -- why, then, into a trade, an art, a science, a mode of living, a conversation, a character, an influence.”

The converse of this is the recognition that every particular element of a language, art, science, or mode of living arises through and is made publicly available by individuals. The contribution the individual makes is typically to represent some possible combination or connection that gives disparate aspects of the world some coherence. A political ideology becomes coherent through the individual’s work of making each of its element square with the others. The usefulness of the individual and his or her individuation are conjoined: “A link was wanting between two craving parts of nature, and he was hurled into being as the bridge over that yawning need, the mediator betwixt two else unmarriageable facts.”

Values may be proclaimed and preferences may be ordered by individuals, who thus become representatives of the political values of all those who find that they have similar values.

It may seem that Emerson overstates his case by including only individuals in a world that is obviously swayed by ideas and ideologies that have a life of their own. However, he means to point out that only what is close to the “common experiences” of ordinary people will become occasion for thought and action. Emerson reflects on the shape of our experience, and finds it has a human shape, the shape of individuals: “We

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7 Matthiessen, American Renaissance, 632.
talk of the world, but we mean a few men and women. If you speak of the age, you mean your own platoon of people.” 10 While ideas and ideologies are not given personality, they only have sway through the force of personality in the individuals who represent them in the formulation of public opinion. The individual in his representative aspect makes a variety of values, beliefs and desires hang together as a coherent whole.

Representative individuals reveal the community to itself. Representatives reveal the contours of the drives and beliefs of their community and make it possible for a people to know itself as it appears to in public, “Other men are lenses through which we read our own minds.” (616) They also make it possible for us to become more than we currently are, and to develop more connections with the world than we currently have. The benefits of representation are akin to the “distinctive benefit of ideas” which is to broaden the mind, and representative individuals offer a service to their communities like “the service rendered by those who introduce moral truths into the general mind.” (624) This service is the provision of meaning and value that allows practical judgment and action. “The soul of man must be the type of our scheme, just as the body of man is the type after which a dwelling-house is built. Adaptations is the peculiarity of human nature.” (696) Possibilities are never apparent until they have been made real by individuals.

II. Representation In the Public Sphere

Emerson’s vision of democratic society centers on the idea of representation. Just as participation in the offices of government is mediated by representatives, so too is participation in political society mediated by representative individuals. Public discourse centers around representative individuals who stake out positions and provide focal points for public debate and deliberation. Discursive representation in the public sphere is broadly analogous with institutional representation in two ways. First, representative individuals present the beliefs, values, and political personae of their communities. However they do it in the public sphere, rather than in the halls of government. Second, the public selects and limits those individuals who can be said to be representative of their communities. This is so, even though there is no formal selection mechanism such as election, because they must actually share some common interests and desires, must have genuine “sympathy and likeness,” with their constituencies, if they are to speak representatively.

**Representative Thinking**

Discursive representation involves the presentation of the beliefs, values and aspirations of some segment of the people in the public sphere. Recall Emerson’s central analogy, that, “As Sir Robert Peel and Mr. Webster vote, so Locke and Rousseau think for thousands.” (715) That representative individuals “think” for others does not mean that they are produce beliefs and values that others recognize and accept as their own. (Emerson could never advocate this sort of loss of intellectual self-reliance. “Every mind must know the whole lesson for itself, -- must go over the whole ground.” (240) Nor does he believe that this is what in fact happens in the American democracy.) Representative
thinking is simply thinking in public. Representatives merely give public expression to the “range of qualities” that give the community and its members their identity. (696) The discursive representative is able to represent his community because he has “evinced the temper, stoutness, and the range of qualities that, among his contemporaries and countrymen, entitle him to fellowship and trust.” (696) Representation in the public sphere is the presentation of the particular constellation of beliefs and desires that make up the identity of the community.

The ties individuals have to their circumstances make them representative of their communities. Speaking of the individual, Emerson suggests that individuality is not a unique singularity, but a particular set of connections to others. Emerson writes, “He [the individual] cleaves to one person, and avoids another, according to their likeness or unlikeness to himself, truly seeking himself in his associates, and moreover in his trade, and habits, and gestures, and meats, and drinks; and comes at last to be faithfully represented by every view you take of his circumstances.” (315) It is this mutual constitution of the individual and his circumstance that becomes visible when the individual is viewed as a representative. This representative relation of an individual and his community is the core of politics in a democratic society. Representation that is effective in bringing to public presence the range of qualities shared with the community, is also effective in bringing to bear the public pressure that this representative authority generates. Emerson suggests that public persuasiveness is in part derived from the fact that the reasons presented by representative individuals are reasons that are representative of that individual’s community. He says, “The men who carry their points do not need to inquire of their constituents what they should say, but are themselves the country which
they represent.” (496) Again there is an echo of the republican ideal, expressed by
George Mason, “To make representation real and actual, the number of Representatives
ought to be adequate; they ought to mix with the people, think as they think, feel as they
feel, ought to be perfectly amenable to them, and thoroughly acquainted with their
interest and condition.”11 Emerson also finds that this quality is the essence of good
political representation: “The men who carry their points do not need to inquire of their
constituents what they should say, but are themselves the country which they represent:
nowhere are its emotions or opinions so instant and true as in them; nowhere so pure
from a selfish infusion. The constituency at home hearkens to their words, watches the
color of their cheek, and therein, as in a glass, dresses its own.”12 Such an organic
connections between representatives and their constituents can be achieved because of
the unique characteristics of the forum in which they “carry their points.”

The representative expresses what lies inherent in the social milieu from which he
emerges. The individual is only representative because of a special connection to some
salient aspect of the people, whether it is a particular belief, value, ideal, or communal
characteristic. Emerson gives the example of Napoleon’s resonance with the strivings of
the bourgeoisie; “The instinct of active, brave, able men, throughout the middle class
everywhere, has pointed out Napoleon as the incarnate Democrat.” (727) That there is
nothing original or superior about Napoleon runs contrary to a conventional view of such
“great men,” as exemplified by Emerson’s friend Carlyle who was at the time extolling
those heroes who manage to lead the uncreative and malleable masses. Emerson may

12 “Character,” Essays, 496.
seem to characteristically overstate the indebtedness of the representative to the people he represents; “great genial power, one would almost say, consists in not being original at all; in being altogether receptive.” (711) But he does not mean to exaggerate. He distinguishes between the representative’s ability to give expressions to the common sense of the people, their general values, and the specific content of public opinion on any given point. The representative differs from his community only in the “range and extent” to which he takes the material provided by the community. (710) From within “the thick of events” the representative individual sees “what men want” and shares “their desire.” He only “adds the needful length of sight and of arm, to come at the desired point.” (710) It is the public individual, in his representative capacity, who lacks maverick creativity and who has become “perfectly amenable” to the his constituency. The people out of whom the representative individual comes hold the sovereign power of creation of values.

The Bonds of Sympathy and the Responsibility of Likeness

According to Emerson, it is the relation of “sympathy and likeness” between an individual and his community that determines whether or not that individual is a representative. The representative displays qualities present, if only latently, in the other members of the community. These qualities may be present in the representative in greater measure, but Emerson emphasizes that the representative individual is only likely to have greater powers of expression. Thus he writes, “Shakespeare’s principal merit may be conveyed in saying that he of all men best understands the English language, and can say what he will.” (621) The abilities of exemplary individuals are only a
manifestation of the material already present in the community—material that, like the English language, is not their creation, but the creation of the community at large.

The similarity between representative individuals and those they represent begins with membership in the community and participation in its particular form of life. In order for the representative to express the values and aspirations of a particular people, he must be “in unison with his time and his country.” (710) He must have the temperament and qualities appropriate to the community’s form of life. In this case, it must be true that, “He is not only representative, but participant. Like can only be known by like. The reason why he knows about them is, that he is of them; he has just come out of nature, or from being a part of that thing.” (619) Sympathetic representation allows for both the representation of the particularity of the actual constituency in the form of their present values and desires, and in the form of the possibilities inherent in those values.

Representation depends on the establishment of a felt connection between the represented group and the representative. The substantive, constructive content of representation that cannot depend on formal selection mechanisms must rely on a coincidence of values in the individual and in what Emerson calls variously the “public mind,” “common heart,” “common nature,” “common sense,” “common sentiment,” “common conscience,” and “common life.” Emersonian representation aims first of all at producing a greater degree of connectedness among those represented, and an increase in the number of connective relationships among individuals.

The close connection between an individual and his community means that when a representative individual expresses his values, beliefs, and common sense, he is representing the community out of which he comes. The effect of this connection is to
preclude the so-called trustee vs. delegate controversy in the theory of representative government. Concerns about ‘instructions’ to the representative are obviated because the representative knows what the hearts and minds of his constituents are by consulting his own, for they are coincident. Emerson explains, “Like can only be known by like. The reason why he knows about them is that he is of them; he has just come out of nature, or from being a part of that thing.” (619) In detailing the connection Emerson does not so much describe a selection mechanism, as he does a criterion by which representatives are identified. The true representative is one who is “known by like.” If an individual finds himself without the support of an audience or without a purchase in a public space, then it seems that he is not a “part of that thing” that makes up the public and the community.

The “sympathy and likeness” that constitute the true relation of representation is also part of the true test of whether or not the representative form is serving as protection against domination. The representative relation can fail of course, if a representative is not able to “make his talent trusted.” The individual is only able to create a representative relation between himself and others if he is able to show a similarity and a consequent unity between himself and others. Emerson explains the failure of representation as a failure of the individual to give expression to the politically salient qualities of the community. Emerson explains the failure of a speaker to attract an audience, or a politician to attract a following, as their failure to align themselves with the public: “The reason why any one refuses his assent to your opinion, or his aid to your benevolent design, is in you: he refuses to accept you as a bringer of truth, because, though you think you have it, he feels that you have it not. You have not given him the

13 “Character,” Essays, 496.
authentic sign.”

The nature of the sign that the individual is authorized to speak for the community is determined by the character of the community, in advance of the appearance of the individual. If an individual would be representative and have a public identity as a member of his community, he must learn to give that sign. Therefore, representative individuals do not have a mandate to act or judge independently of their constituencies’ values. Such independence would in fact destroy the representative relation.

When Emerson raises the problem of the leader without followers, he finds the fault to be with the leader. This means that the individual, insofar as he wishes to speak publicly and representatively, must not stand firmly for what he believes, if that means radically distancing and differentiating himself from his community. In describing a would-be public intellectual and representative voice, Emerson says of the prospective representative individual that, “He did not expect a sympathy, with his thought from the village, but he went with it to the chosen and intelligent, and found no entertainment for it, but mere misapprehension, distaste and scoffing. Men are strangely mistimed and misapplied; and the excellence of each is an inflamed individualism which separates him more.”

Far from celebrating self-reliance to the point at which individuals separate from society, Emerson worries that “an inflamed individualism” will prevent individuals from connecting with their communities, a state he describes as “solitary imprisonment.”

Being right in one’s soul, i.e., having a clear conscience, is not in itself enough; the citizen cannot deny the claim that his community has on him.

15 “Montaigne,” Essays, 704.
16 “Montaigne,” Essays, 706.
The public mind requires individuals who cultivate and create connections between themselves and their communities. Representation does not happen spontaneously, in moments of inspiration prompted by external forces. The gathering of material, the sniffing out of the sense of the community, and the intimacy which long familiarity breeds, are all part of the work of the representative. How is it possible that “Locke and Rousseau think, for thousands?” The paths by which a community’s sense of itself is channeled into representative individuals are largely intuitive. Emerson fills out the picture of this connection: “Show us the constituency, and the now invisible channels by which the senator is made aware of their wishes; the crowd of practical and knowing men, who, by correspondence or conversation, are feeding him with evidence, anecdotes and estimates, and it will bereave his fine attitude and resistance of something of their impressiveness.” This process involves the matching of individual genius in the creative individual with the genius of the public mind. All individuals—even the extraordinary genius—are exemplary of their surroundings. Emerson generalizes this democratic principle: “It is easy to see that what is best written or done by genius in the world, was no man’s work, but came by wide social labor, when a thousand wrought like one, sharing the same impulse.” The connection between representative individuals and the communities out of which they come into a wider public is affirmed in the concrete identification of the essential values of both. The effect of this democratic principle is to strip power and authority from individuals, just as power and authority was stripped from monarchs and lords, and invest it in the people as a whole.

17 “Shakespeare,” Essays, 715.
18 “Shakespeare,” Essays, 715.
19 “Shakespeare,” Essays, 715.
have, even non-elected leaders, in communities that have been infused with democratic ideals, is the power of the people. Thus, Napoleon is Napoleon because he carries, “with him the power and affections of vast numbers.” Emerson’s idea of the connection between representatives and their communities can be understood as a thin theory of descriptive representation. Descriptive representatives become representative because they bear the appropriate demographic markers of those represented. Descriptive representation produces substantive representation if the representatives, will spontaneously do as the people could have done, since they are of the people, and share in their circumstances. The descriptive element of discursive representation is important for keeping the representation honest, since no formal legal provisions for accountability are available in the realm of ideas.

**Part III: Justice and a Representative Public Sphere**

The basic justification of the representative relationship in democracies is a claim of justice that individuals and political constituencies can make: that they be participants, and have a public role in the deliberations of the polity. A representative public sphere, in Emerson’s view, affords the widest possible degree of participation in public life. It is thus the best assurance that this claim of justice is met. Emerson fills out this view by outlining how representative individuals further the attainment of political justice by minimizing three kinds of injustice that may affect communication. A representative effectively counters all three. Representative democracy is the regime least likely to foster what Emerson calls egoism, which is the inability of individuals to develop a sense of

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20 “Napoleon,” Essays, 727. Emerson identifies this principle at work, even in undemocratic institutional settings, so that it should be all the more obvious in democratic institutional settings.
justice. Representative democracy is the best defense against the domination of any part of a society by any other, whether through the use of the state apparatus or through non-institutional forms and means of power. Representative democracy is also the best guarantee against oppression by a dominant part of society, which would prevent new social forms from arising and achieving representative expression.

**Egoism**

One aspect of the moral distinctiveness of representative democracy is the way in which a representative and deliberative public sphere transforms the meaning of citizenship. The public sphere is not simply a forum for the assertion of wills, or the location in which individuals express their desires and preferences (as if it were the site of grand roll-call votes of the entire people). Rather, in the public sphere individual citizens speak as representatives: in speaking to others, representative individuals seek to speak for others. Reasons are offered in public deliberation, and these reasons are reasons that some constituency accepts, and that others may accept. The representative nature of the public sphere teaches citizens to recognize that when they seek to become “public and human in [their] regards and actions,” they must themselves become representative, i.e., they must offer reasons that are acceptable to some, and can be acceptable to others. Thus, the activity of citizenship, in the public sphere, is to be representative, to “think for others” in a representative way. The representative public sphere educates citizens into a sense of justice appropriate to a deliberative democracy.

Emerson characterizes this representative work as the “humanization” or advancements in deliberations that make reasons available to citizens that would
otherwise be inaccessible. The representative individual must “make an easy way for all” and “disenchant” supporting reasons, so that they may “walk forth to the day in human shape.” On the one hand, other representative individuals make present the values, beliefs, and desires that are native to their forms of life and ways of seeing the world; “Each man seeks those of different quality from his own, and such as are good of their kind; that is, he seeks other men, and the otherest.” On the other hand, they take those alternative possibilities and translate them into terms that can be understood by all.

The first service of representative individuals, then, is as “a collyrium to clear our eyes from egotism, and enable us to see other people and their works.” Representative individuals are a defense against our inability to recognize the equal claim to voice and sovereignty of other citizens. By these vehicles citizens encounter others, and recognize other lives, other ideas, and other values. The encounter with plurality and diversity, and the need to engage it in deliberations in the public sphere, casts the attachments citizens have with specific forms of authority into relief against other possibilities. This self-awareness is a precondition to the deliberative nature of the public sphere, in which citizens attempt to persuade one another to adopt new views. Here Emerson offers his prescription against too little acknowledgment of others: “Each new law and political movement has meaning for you. Stand before each of its tablets and say, ‘Under this mask did my Proteus nature hide itself.’ This remedies the defect of our too great nearness to ourselves. This throws our actions into perspective.”

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24 “History,” Essays, 239.
contextually of values, beliefs, and desires gives citizens enough distance from themselves and their own values, beliefs, and desires to see that theirs are somewhat contingent and mutable, and not entirely universal and permanent. This recognition makes possible the further recognition that each citizen’s attachment to them—the subjective experience of a relation—is contingent as well. The representative public sphere teaches citizens, in the first instance, how to change their minds.

One practical consequence of the representative public sphere is evident in Emerson’s critique of reform movements. Reformers often misunderstand how they need to go about bringing people into agreement with them. He remarks, “Then, again, 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? 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.”

The question “Are they my poor?” is sometimes read by Emerson’s interpreters as Emerson’s signal that he is distancing himself from the fate of those who are not able to be self-reliant. This moral and emotional distance is thereby understood as a consequence of Emerson’s individualism, since this distance is taken to be what makes his own self-reliance possible. However, in this passage Emerson does not seem to be addressing his remarks to the poor, but to the “foolish philanthropist” who fails to adequately speak as representative of the poor. Emerson is addressing the question of how people come to “belong” to one another. Immediately following the passage quoted above, Emerson affirms that there are those who do belong to him: “There is a class of

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25 “Self-Reliance,” Essays, 262.

26 In “Aretic Ethics: Emerson and Nietzsche on Pity, Friendship, and Love,” ESQ, Vol. 43, (1st-4th Quarters 1997), for example, Van Cromphout finds such a conception of ‘distance’ in Emerson. He does this in order to find a closer fit between the conceptions of love and friendship in Emerson and Nietzsche.
persons to whom by all spiritual affinity I am bought and sold; for them I will go to prison, if need be…”

Rather than signaling that the self-reliant individual will be impervious to the claims of others, Emerson is teaching the would-be reformer how to make such claims effective. Spiritual affinity and moral claims only arise in relation to those to whom one belongs. The reformer’s job, therefore, is to develop and extend the relations of belonging. He can do this only as the representative of those they seek to benefit, and by speaking, again as representative, in a fashion that will be persuasive to those who’s values and actions they seek to alter.

**Domination**

In speaking of injustice, Emerson speaks of becoming “underlings” through “dominion” of others. For Emerson, this is not a mere metaphor taken from politics to describe the life of the mind in dramatic terms that might appeal to one dedicated to it. Nor is Emerson’s concern over men becoming “intellectual suicides” due to a fear of tedium, rote, or mere conventionality in the arts and letters. Rather, Emerson considers this phenomena of the public sphere to be the basis of the political ill that goes by this name. Just as representation in the public sphere under girds the representative institutions of a democracy, so too does the justice of the public sphere, and of the life of the mind, ground the justice of institutional political life.

The danger that Emerson identifies as besetting the public sphere is that of the domination of an overbearing single set of values, a single culture or ideology that results in a lack of creativity and expression. The threat he identifies is the potential dominion

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27 “Self-Reliance,” Essays, 262.
of public opinion over the minds of individuals. “The People” in its incarnation as the present sovereign is a jealous god and will brook no others before it:

Our delight in reason degenerates into idolatry of the herald. Especially when a mind of powerful method has instructed men, we find the examples of oppression. The dominion of Aristotle, the Ptolemaic astronomy, the credit of Luther, of Bacon, of Locke;—in religion the history of hierarchies, of saints, and the sects which have taken the name of each founder, are in point.28

The number of individuals comprehended under these names—and other names closer and more familiar—increases as more people read, write, and speak in public. Therefore, democracy demands constant vigilance against the rise of new orthodoxies, new settled opinions, new fixed stars in the social and political constellations.

The threat of domination in the realm of discourse does not take the form of alien domination. Rather, a diversity of representation must guard against too much influence by any one of the “contemporaries and companions” that populate the current public sphere. One of the dangers of a politics that incorporates the desire for an original relationship among the citizens, and between the citizens and their government, is the drive for closure, finality, and completeness. Emerson’s worry about the “dominion of Aristotle, the Ptolemaic astronomy, the credit of Luther, of Bacon, of Locke” is a worry that people might too easily let others do their thinking for them.29 Domination through the representation of ideas would occur when citizens come to merely mirror what is represented to them as their own beliefs, values, and desires.30

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30 In this way, Emerson’s conception of the threats to discursive representation is similar to a theory of ideology like Marx’s. Ideological domination occurs when the ideas of one element of society are being passed off as the ideas appropriate for the whole of society.
Public opinion unmediated by representative individuals would ensnare the mind of the individual, and be a source of domination and oppression. Idolatry is the main threat to the openness of the public sphere:

We boast our emancipation from many superstitions; but if we have broken any idols, it is through a transfer of the idolatry. What have I gained, that I no longer immolate a bull to Jove, or to Neptune, or a mouse to Hecate; that I do not tremble before the Eumenides, or the Catholic Purgatory, or the Calvinistic Judgment-day,--- if I quake at opinion, the public opinion, as we call it.\(^{31}\)

Threats to freedom were traditionally thought to arise from repressive government. Emerson looks in new places for threats to freedom. America was founded on an emancipatory urge that identified a tyrant and an errant government as the source of unfreedom. Emerson turns his attention to a new kind of tyranny, one that can work on the mind and the mood. He describes this threat as arising with the new public power conferred upon individuals as citizens: “Each man, too, is a tyrant in tendency, because he would impose his idea on others; and their trick is their natural defense.”\(^{32}\)

This is the meaning of incarnation: the having of a body, being particular, is an antidote to the inevitability of being a type.

Representative individuals, as partial and particular examples, balance the potentially stultifying and inhibiting effect of a public opinion that that makes everyone too much of one mind. The best way to resist domination, whether it be by the state, by the few, or by the majority, is through enough diversity in the public sphere to ensure multiple independent power bases, each with its own self-authorizing justifications. For Emerson the name of this diversity is democracy. Emerson writes, “Democracy is

\(^{31}\) “Character,” Essays, 499.

\(^{32}\) “Nominalist and Realist,” Essays, 582.
morose, and runs to anarchy, but in the state, and in the schools, it is indispensable to
resist the consolidation of all men into a few men.\textsuperscript{33} Diversity of representation in the
public sphere, although necessary, is not sufficient to prevent domination, however.
Diversity is the condition for the application of what Emerson calls “nature’s remedy” of
rotation.\textsuperscript{34} Rotation is diversity in succession.

The dominion of any particular (whether of values or faction) would be unjust
primarily because, as Emerson recognizes, “No man, in all the procession of famous men,
is reason or illumination or that essence we were looking for.”\textsuperscript{35} Emerson observes that
every particular human meaning is partial and incomplete: “We live in a system of
approximations. Every end is prospective of some other end, which is also temporary; a
round and final success nowhere.”\textsuperscript{36} The partiality and incompleteness of every person
and group means that every person and group needs representation; no ‘general’
representation is possible, because of this particularity.\textsuperscript{37} This particularity also means
that no one is in possession of the complete truth, of the whole of the good, of every form
of value, and thus none can justifiable claim to overreach all the others in power and
prestige. Emerson formulates this principle in terms of the advantages of knowledge that
many minds bring to a question: “Why fancy that you have all the truth in your keeping?
There is much to say on all sides.”\textsuperscript{38} The truths that are at stake in the question of
representation are specifically social and political in nature. Incompleteness necessitates

\textsuperscript{33} “Nominalist and Realist,” Essays, 583.
\textsuperscript{34} “But nature brings all this about in due time. Rotation is her remedy.” “Uses of Great Men,” Essays, 623.
\textsuperscript{35} “Uses of Great Men,” Essays, 630.
\textsuperscript{36} “Nature,” Essays, 552.
\textsuperscript{37} This argument is parallel to the more systematic account in J. S. Mill’s On Liberty, Chapter 2.
\textsuperscript{38} “Montaigne,” Essays, 694.
amelioration and proliferation: “Hence the immense benefit of party in politics, as it reveals faults of character in a chief, which the intellectual force of the persons, with ordinary opportunity, and not hurled into aphelion by hatred, could not have seen. Since we are all so stupid, what benefit that there should be two stupidities!”39 Democracy is the more valuable, the more “stupidities” are given public expression through representation.

Representation in the public sphere offers a system of checks and balances analogous to the institutional checks and balances, as, for example, elaborated by James Madison in *Federalist 10*. Emerson’s view of representation shows how democratic discourse is channeled in the public sphere. “We balance one man with his opposite,” Emerson says, “and the health of the state depends on the see-saw.”40 The principle conditions that Emerson identifies for the proper workings of this self-checking action are the freedoms of speech and association.41 The key to the continual balancing-act is the full representation of the multiplicity of values, points of view, and ways of life present in the people as a whole. Emerson says representative individuals acts as the, “checks and balances of nature, as a natural weapon against the exaggeration and formalism of bigots and blockheads.”42 Emerson establishes that every individual and every group is partial and is a purveyor of “stupidities.” Therefore, every citizen and every representative, in their roles as “bigots and blockheads,” participates in the system of checks and balances.

39 “Nominalist and Realist,” Essays, 582.
40 “Uses of Great Men,” Essays, 628.
42 “Montaigne,” Essays, 702.
Every constituency has a claim to have its own representative, whether it be in the public sphere or the institutions of the state. Furthermore, representation in the public sphere (but perhaps not in institutional settings—Emerson has little to say about this) must be ‘descriptive’. In the public sphere, the accurate correspondence and resemblance between representative and constituency is necessary, since the mechanism for the selection of representatives is identification with representatives who are ‘like us’. The descriptive element is necessary since one of the roles of representatives is to convey the views of the constituency to the public at large.\textsuperscript{43} The descriptive element is also necessary because another of the roles of representative individuals is to provide public presence for the represented. Having one’s own representative to counter the “credit” of others ensures that a social space is preserved for each citizen’s own self-reliant thought and expression. This aspect of Emerson’s concept of representation is rooted in the radical democratic ideology of equal participation.\textsuperscript{44} No formal or institutional selection mechanism can substitute for this “elective” connection.

Citizens let others do their voting for them only when they have good reason to believe that their representatives will faithfully pursue their interests. Likewise, the legitimacy of representation in the sphere of public deliberation is found in the relation between representative and constituency. This means that our representative must “speak to our want,” and that “our want” takes precedence over what the representative may offer that is not elementally constitutive of our values. The representative individual can

\textsuperscript{43} Hanna Pitkin finds the informational account of representation in Anthony Downs, An Economic Theory of Democracy, New York, 1957, 88-91. Downs says that representatives are “specialists in discovering, transmitting and analyzing popular opinion,” a statement with which Emerson could readily agree, if by popular opinion one understands the “common mind.” This would obviate the paradox generated by the fact that “on the many issues on which people have no will, or do not know what they want, ‘there is nothing for representatives to represent.’” Pitkin, The Concept of Representation, 83.

\textsuperscript{44} Pitkin identifies this “substitute for direct democracy” in arguments in support of the American and French revolutions. Again, her narrow focus on institutional representation allows her to preserve the link with pre-democratic conceptions of representation. Here she finds an original source of the concept of representation in English in the idea of Parliament in “the thirteenth century in England.” Pitkin, The Concept of Representation, 85-86.
speak for others because, “Men see in him their own dreams and glimpses made available, and made to pass for what they are.” The represented must recognize their representatives as representative of them, they must have them as theirs, if they are not to be dominated. This requires some guarantee that the relationship of representation remains true to those represented, and does not become an occasion for ‘representatives’ to impose their own will and ideas on others. In this way representatives guard against domination. They can only do this if there is a connection between representative and constituency, such that a representative can be identified as actually being representative of his constituency.

Although the size and extent of modern democracies makes direct political participation impossible, representation allows an approximation of such participation. The more varied, or “proportional,” the range of representatives, the more closely representation approximates direct participation. Thus, if a single or a few representatives take precedence and exercise dominion over all others, representations fails to be as just as possible. No representative may have a privileged position in the culture such that other constituencies are prevented from being adequately represented. If there is diversity in the people, then there must be an adequate corresponding diversity in the representative public sphere. The claim against domination originates in the principle that each constituency must be represented. The claim is valid, no matter how constituencies are identified, or what factors are considered relevant in determining the extent of diversity in the people. Emerson recognizes that these factors will change with time. He is only concerned that as they proliferate, which they inevitable will, the

45 “Plato,” Essays, 644.
resulting increase in diversity in the people be reflected in increased diversity in representatives.

**Oppression**

The danger of the tyrannous imposition of ideas on others is not the only, or even the worst danger that besets the public sphere. The oppressive force of dominant representatives may also prevent new forms of representation from arising and gaining a foothold in the public sphere. Therefore, the principle of rotation does not apply only to representatives of already existing constituencies, but also to those constituencies and representatives that are only now coming onto being. The public sphere of a democracy must therefore be open to amelioration. For Emerson, therefore, what is strange may in fact be something quite beneficial. “A foreign greatness is the antidote for cabalism,” and the presentation of forms of life “other” than those adopted by most citizens guards against both stagnation and the tyranny of the received opinion of the majority.46 Rotation is, Emerson says, “the law of nature,” because it is the necessary accompaniment of amelioration:

> When nature removes a great man, people explore the horizon for a successor; but none comes, and none will. His class is extinguished with him. In some other and quite different field the next man will appear; not Jefferson, not Franklin, but now a great salesman, then a road-contractor, then a student of fishes, then a buffalo-hunting explorer, or a semi-savage Western general. Thus we make a stand against our rougher masters.47

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46 “Uses of Great Men,” Essays, 627.

It is only the continual advent of the new form of representation, and the transformation of old forms to meet new social conditions that ensures the continual health of the democracy. ⁴⁸

Any personality, no matter how advantageous in its time, must be eclipsed by another who comes latter. That is because no matter how fresh, how inspiring, how liberating a personality, an idea, or a movement is when it first comes on the scene, it eventually becomes the received wisdom, the traditional authority, the customary manner, the habitual orthodoxy. The power of representative individuals must be tempered: “But a new danger appears in the excess of influence of the great man. His attractions warp us from our place. We have become underlings and intellectual suicides. Ah! yonder in the horizon is our help; other great men, new qualities, counterweights and checks on each other.” ⁴⁹ Rotation and succession—in office, before the public’s eye, and in the mouths and on the pens of those who represent in the public sphere—is the rule and the watchword for democracy. Otherwise public opinion itself risks becoming an idol, and slipping into that condition of the tyranny of the mass mind. Such idolatry is only possible if the partial and provisional nature of every individual is denied: “No man, in all the procession of famous men, is reason or illumination, or that essence we are looking for; but is an exhibition, in some quarter, of new possibilities.” ⁵⁰ Finality and completeness is unavailable to humans, because what is available is made so through

⁴⁸ Emerson is again revealed as the fountain of what William Connolly calls the “post-Nietzschean ethical sensibility,” which consists of the will to “expose hegemonic identities; destabilize moral order; cultivate generosity between alternative moral/ethical perspectives; (again with Foucault) to contest moral visions that suppress the constructed, contingent, relational character of identity.” William E. Connolly, The Augustinian Imperative: A Reflection of the Politics of Morality, Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage, 1993, 143.


individuals. What is available is the possibility of progressing beyond or transcending the present individual to a new state.

“The limits of the possible are enlarged,” Emerson says, only through actual examples of possibilities, even if they are as mundane as the discovery of a new kind of butterfly.51 “By acquainting us with new fields of activity,” the representative individual “cools our affection for the old.”52 The old activity may be valuable for its own sake, but continual activity, and newly developed activity prevents citizens from becoming mired in their concepts, and taking them too literally. Emerson is engaged in a continual battle against reification. Representative individuals answer the need that Emerson announces: “We must extend the area of our life, and multiply our relations.”53 This extension and multiplication can only take place through the proliferation of representatives. Emerson considered this proliferation to be so important, that the ultimate goal of the public sphere is the production of representative individuals. This is not to say that society exists for the sake of the individual, but that society exists to produce individuals, who are able to produce a beneficial social effect.

Emerson lauds more than the mere fact of the flux of amelioration and its resultant diversity. Emerson values the virtues of use and acceptance that constitute the proper human response to flux and amelioration. Amelioration is a fact of nature and a quality of the social world that individuals must adapt themselves to. It is only heightened in democracies: “There was never such a miscellany of facts. The world extends itself like American trade. We conceive Greek or Roman life, life in the Middle

51 Richardson uses this example of the butterfly to demonstrate Emerson’s enthusiasm for science as a vehicle for the advancement of human possibility. Richardson, The Mind on Fire, 141.


Ages, to be a simple and comprehensible affair; but modern life to respect a multitude of things, which is distracting.” Emerson focuses on the response to this multiplicity. Democracies are in effect societies that have learned to accept the ubiquity of amelioration and diversity and have incorporated them into the system of social and political action. Goethe becomes the exemplar not only of modern individual, (Goethe was “the most modern of the moderns”) but perhaps even more than Napoleon, he is exemplary of the democrat as well, because he is “hundred-handed, Argus-eyed, able and happy to cope with this rolling miscellany of facts and sciences, and by his own versatility to dispose of them with ease.” Emerson teaches that this process of development is liberating for the individual and can be the basis for optimism about the social and political prospects of democracies. Emerson’s optimism consists in this: moral and political amelioration is possible as long as the public sphere remains open to the representation of alternative moral and political possibilities.

Conclusion: Representative Participation

The idea of representation is central to Emerson’s vision of democratic society. Just as participation in the public offices of government is mediated by representatives, so too is participation in the public sphere mediated by representative individuals. Public discourse centers around representative individuals who stake out positions and provide focal points for public debate and deliberation. The concept of representative individuals

54 “Goethe,” Essays, 751.

55 Wesley Mott makes this point in reference both to Emerson’s concept of “compensation,” and to “his obsession with the mutability of human life that haunts his early journals.” Wesley T. Mott, “Christ Crucified Christology, Identity, and Emerson’s Sermon No. 5,” in Joel Myerson, ed. Emerson Centenary Essays, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982, 21.


57 “Goethe,” Essays, 751.
is designed to show that public figures, however exceptional they may be in respect to their powers of expression, do not lead the public in its values. If a representative individual matches the prevailing dispositions of the public, that is because that individual is a part of that public, she is “a part of that thing.” She “thinks for thousands” because she says in public what thousands already think. The values, beliefs, and desires—in short, the public identity—she expresses do not belong to her as an individual; she did not make them. Insofar as she is “public and human in [her] regards and actions,” she is representative of her community, rather than being unique in her singularity. Thus, the community and all its members participate in the public life of the political community through those individuals who faithfully bring the character of that community to light.58

The ‘public’ doesn’t for the most part participate directly in the public sphere, just as most citizens don’t participate in public office. The public doesn’t conduct public deliberations; most people don’t give expression to their ideas and values in public. However, public figures don’t simply provide political options from which the public chooses. Rather, as “representatives of opinion” they are the creatures of a constituency just as much as those who are elected to office are. The people can tell when representative individuals go astray, and limit them with the pressure of their approval and disapproval, and by granting and withholding their audience. More importantly, the

58 Rather than lament the lack of or loss of the participation of individuals in politics, democrats should follow Emerson in his attempt to recognize and understand the ways in which people do participate in politics. Once such means of participation are identified, democrats should hasten to honor and celebrate these paths of political engagement. Otherwise ungrounded idealism is apt to result in the kind of disappointments that Judith Shklar detailed in After Utopia: The Decline of Political Faith. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) Schattschneider’s warning about these dangers is still relevant today: “We become cynical about democracy because the public does not act the way the simplistic definition of democracy says that it should act, or we try to whip the public into doing things that it does not want to do, is unable to do and has too much sense to do. The crisis here is not a crisis in democracy but a crisis in theory.” (Schattschneider 134)
original and intimate connection of representative individuals and their communities ensures that they represent their communities from the first, and continuously.

How can so large a number of people as comprise ‘the people’ be said to participate in the public, political life of the community? Emerson saw representative individuals filling in to make it possible for great numbers of people to have a presence in public life. The political relation of representation, when transferred and extended into the public sphere, enables citizen participation in deliberative democracy that would otherwise be unavailable in large political communities.