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The intellectual connections between Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and Walt Whitman (1819-1892), and their historical context within Hindu philosophy and ethics are well-known. But the ways in which these connections can foster a democratic ethics for modern America is the primary purchase of Jeremy David Engels’s *The Ethics of Oneness*, an unassuming yet ambitious reimagining of these two American writers. In *Ethics*, Engels focuses exclusively on Emerson and Whitman “to recover [their] two long-forgotten philosophies of oneness” (9). A project both of literary-historical recovery and a timely theorization of an ethos suited to a contemporary democracy often viewed as in a state of crisis, *Ethics* challenges readers in and out of the academic space not only to see their lives as shaped by literature and history, but urges them to recognize “the space of commonality, identification, and inter-connectedness between opponents” (189).

Versed in Sanskrit and Hindu philosophy, Engels powerfully presents the practice of yoga—a core concept in the book—as it emerged in nineteenth-century American culture. In this work, Engels’s allegiance is clearly on the side of the latter of the two American writers that subtitle *Ethics*. Whitman, “seer, prophet, genius” (166)—as Engels calls him at one point—represents a oneness that respects manyness because, as *Ethics* puts it, “[a] oneness that refuses to respect difference is unethical” (206). Emerson, on the other hand, represents the oneness of an over-soul that views manyness, difference, diversity as unreal facades, and hence fails to produce an ethics of democratic engagement. *Ethics* does excellent work of elucidating how the *Bhagavad Gita*—and
important concepts such as Advaita Vedanta, māyā, svadharma, and their many historical translations (and mistranslations)—influenced Emerson and Whitman’s views of democracy, and those chapters are the most intellectually enjoyable. Engels is not the first academic to examine works such as Emerson’s “The Over-Soul” and Whitman’s Leaves of Grass for their ethical implications or their relationship to the Gita, judging from the wealth of secondary scholarship that Ethics brings to the table. As a result, the book treads ground familiar to readers of the subject. Engels’s story, however, “is unique because it focuses on communication as foundational to living an ethical life dedicated to oneness” (25). Hence, the book primarily argues that “yoga as communication,” drawn from respect for a oneness that also recognizes difference and diversity, can provide an ethical system capable of preserving democratic institutions.

Despite its narrow focus on two American literary figures, the concerns of Ethics are global, transnational, and focused on critique of Emerson and Whitman’s philosophies to the extent that they represent what Engels argues to be a viable ethics of oneness. However, much of the book may strike specialists as somewhat loose in its historical or philosophical concepts. The many generalizations about “Western philosophy” (87), “the West” (102), “capitalism” and “liberalism” (6, 54), “white supremacy” (108-9), “Americans” (23, 53, 80, 131), “liberals” (5), and the “liberal subject” (54, 79) are not unforgivably inaccurate, but they may likely beg nuance from more demanding readers. Some may find the assertion, for example, that “[t]he timeless can only be known in time” (12) a baffling contradiction; religiously-inflected claims such as “[d]emocracy is sanctified by the ontological reality of oneness” (188) or “[o]neness lends democracy divine sanction” (195) politically problematic; the idea of “the fragile miracle that is life” (7) theologically unarticulated; or the elision of atheism with capitalism (“At [atheism’s] most brutal is a greedy capitalism whose devotion to profit transforms human bodies...into commodities to be exploited” (105)) philosophically precarious. Ethics can sometimes let its assumptions about persons and orientations that do not align with its particular idea of oneness get away from it.

This prosaic and at times idealistic ambiguity is not to say that Ethics is without philosophical merit. Despite the contradictions and paradoxes readers will encounter in the work, these moments are in fact intrinsic to discussions of the relationship between oneness and manyness. While such rhetoric may turn off readers demanding or at least expecting precision and clear-cut categories, the dissonance one may feel in reconciling these apparent opposites is part of the journey. “Oneness is an experience that is beyond language, but the map to this experience is written in words” (19), Engels tells us, and one of the admirable strengths of Ethics is its exploration not only of how we may comprehend such apparent paradoxes, but how they can be made foundational to a democratic ethics.

Methodologically, Ethics leaves some unanswered questions. It claims to “follow the spirit of the pragmatic method as William James describes it in Pragmatism” (11). Engels acknowledges quite rightly that “[t]he pragmatic method treats all truth claims as fallible and therefore subject to revision. Truth is made—and unmade—in experience, James insists” (12). Yet what immediately follows are
statements such as “Oneness is not a theory to be tested against reality,” and the author’s own admission that “I do not question the truth of oneness in this book” (12)—claims that uncomfortably pit the ideology of Ethics against its method. James and pragmatism make few appearances in Ethics, and Engels’s insistence that oneness is the true reality severely complicates the book’s alleged commitment to the pragmatic method of evaluating ethics based on their practical consequences and the fallibility of their “truth.” The ethics of oneness that Engels (finally) provides in the conclusion to the book are not treated pragmatically; they are pronouncements to cultivate the sense of oneness Engels has repeatedly emphasized throughout Ethics. Precisely how these ethical pronouncements should, could, or even can be manifested in everyday concrete experience—especially in a pluralistic context—is unfortunately obscure.

Despite its methodological looseness and philosophical generalizations, the work’s most valuable academic contribution is its attempt to appreciate Emerson and Whitman beyond merely their Transcendentalist context, proffering a more global interpretation of these two famous American writers. Ethics will appeal to interdisciplinary readers interested in alternative views of Emerson and Whitman that do not rely exclusively on canonical readings; Americanists and American Studies readers who often wrestle with the definition of “American” in a pluralistic, global age; and non-specialists interested in the intersection between literary study and ethics. Engels is very good at stitching the ideological threads among the Gita, Hindu philosophy, and their reception in Emerson and Whitman, even when the often impressionistic and elliptical insistence on oneness and the ethics it is purported to cultivate begin to overtake the discussion. This enthusiasm can often overshadow the historical and philosophical scholarship while highlighting Engels the person. But then a book about ethics is, of course, about persons and their multifaceted and inevitably complex interactions with one another.

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This absorbing volume consists of two distinct, though related parts. The center of the book is the annotated translation of a Marathi novel, entitled The Subhedar’s Son, written in 1895 by the Rev. Dinkar Shankar Sawarkar, the son of a Marathi Brahmin convert to Christianity. The novel describes in a semi-fictional manner the long process by which the author’s father came to embrace the Christian faith: why and how he became a convert against the wishes of his Brahmin family and caste. Preceding and following the translation are introductory essays and a conclusion to the novel by the translator, Deepra Dandekar, who is a direct