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Ralph Waldo Emerson's Mentor at Harvard: Professor Levi Frisbie, Jr.

By

Gerald F. Vaughn

A day after the death of Harvard professor Levi Frisbie, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the great essayist, poet, and philosopher who studied under Frisbie at Harvard, was writing in his daily journal of men with "minds of republican strength and elegant accomplishments. Such a one died yesterday, Professor Frisbie will hardly be supplied by any man in the community."[1]

Terence Martin writes:

> Deeply influential as a teacher, Levi Frisbie was the first Alford Professor of Natural Religion, Moral Philosophy, and Civil Polity at Harvard (1817-1822). His *Inaugural Address* (1817) indicates his regard for the ideas of Common Sense philosophy, Indeed, Scottish realism, adapted to circumstances as it could be, fit very well the provisions of the John Alford estate for establishing a chair of philosophy: It could encourage religious and civic responsibility by reminding man of his duties as a human being and by showing 'the coincidence between the doctrines of revelation and the dictates of reason,'

[1] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson with Annotations, 1820-1824.* Edited by Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1909), 161-162, footnote 1.

> never losing sight of 'the absolute necessity and vast utility of a divine revelation.

John Alford, who died in September 1761, endowed this chair by his will. However, not until 1817 had sufficient funds accumulated to make the first appointment.[2]

Josiah Quincy, Harvard class of 1821, studied under Frisbie and went on to become president of Harvard. In Quincy's history of Harvard University, he wrote:

> Few men have left deeper traces of their moral and intellectual excellence in the memory of their contemporaries than Mr. Frisbie. In the collegiate circle in which he moved, he was the object of universal confidence and affection. He united a classic taste with great acuteness of intellect and soundness of judgment; and with a mind highly gifted and highly cultivated, rich in the powers of conversation and research, he regulated his life by a standard of moral and religious principle exquisitely pure and elevated.

Writing many years later, Quincy also said of Frisbie:

> He had lost the use of his eyes for purposes of study, but the clearness and condensation of his thought, as well as the exquisite finish of the language in which it was conveyed, showed that his mind had not suffered from the deprivation.[3]

Samuel Gilman, another of Frisbie's former students, wrote:

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[2] Terence Martin, *The Instructed Vision: Scottish Common Sense Philosophy and the Origins of American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961), 17.

[3] Josiah Quincy, *The History of Harvard University*, Vol. II (Cambridge: John Owen, 1840), 328; Quincy, *Figures of the Past* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1926 [first published in 1883]), 32.

> In 1817 Levi Frisbie, a name dear to the scholars of his own generation,…was transferred to the new chair of Alford Professor of Moral Philosophy, which, for five years preceding his death, he adorned with a felicity of analysis, and a charm of eloquence, rarely surpassed.

In recognition of his reputation as a scholar, Frisbie was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.[4]

To what extent was Frisbie Emerson's mentor at Harvard? The evidence is circumstantial, yet strong and convincing, that Frisbie was instrumental in Emerson's intellectual development. Ralph L. Rusk writes of Emerson:

> Essays and themes were to him the most exciting academic exercises. But the study of philosophy, though Dugald Stewart's elementary philosophy and William Paley's moral philosophy were required texts in both junior and senior years, could stir him. He was even enthusiastic about Stewart's success in making a textbook glamorous and was struck by what he regarded as the Scot's brilliant promise of effects that were to follow from the new analysis of the human mind.[5]

While a student a Harvard, in 1820 and 1821, Emerson wrote two Bowdoin Prize essays, "The Character of Socrates" and "The present State of Ethical Philosophy," neither of which was published at the time. Regarding the latter essay, D. H. Meyer declares:

> In this essay, Emerson announced that in the nineteenth century ethical studies would be called upon to perform an important social function…. Emerson called for a public ethic to guide the liberated conscience.

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[4] Samuel Gilman, "John Brazer, D.D.," in *Annals of the American Unitarian Pulpit*. Edited by William B. Sprague (New York: Robert Carter & Bros., 1865), 505.

[5] Ralph L. Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), 80.

Though Emerson's prescient plea was not heard outside the walls of Harvard, his hope was largely realized as moral philosophy came to hold an exalted position in the debate on public issues throughout most of the nineteenth century.[6]

Emerson's essay on the present state of ethical philosophy is most indicative of what he had learned of moral philosophy while at Harvard. For that reason this essay will be discussed carefully and in depth here before turning to, and discussing at length, the role of Professor Levi Frisbie, Jr.

Emerson's essay emphasizes that "fundamental principles are taught by the moral Sense, and no advancement of time of knowledge can improve them." This would seem to be due to the intuitive and decisive nature of the moral Sense, "an intuition by which we directly determine the merit or demerit of an action." Because he really was examining the state of then-present moral philosophy, which after Frisbie he called moral science, and moral philosophy was more familiar in usage than ethical philosophy, the following discussion will tend to substitute moral as synonymous and interchangeable with ethical except when a direct quote of Emerson is given.[7]

Starting out where he left off in his previous year's essay on the character of Socrates, Emerson outlines briefly the slow but steady evolution of moral philosophy from the ancients to the then-modern. He suggested the evolution was slow because "Ethics were not thus early separated from the immature, misunderstood sciences of logic and metaphysics…We date the reduction of ethics to anything like a separate system from the time of Socrates." He groups the Greek philosophers Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato as "alone among the sons of Adam, qualified to institute and methodize the science of morality."[8]

Following that systematization of moral science, Emerson credits the Stoics, principally Zeno, Epictetus, Arrian, and Marcus Antoninus as

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[6] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Two Unpublished Essays*, with introduction by Edward Everett Hale (Boston: Lamson, Wolffe & Co., 1896); D.H. Meyer, *The Instructed Conscience: The Shaping of the American National Ethic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), ix.

[7] Emerson, *Two Unpublished Essays*, 58, 62.

[8] Ibid., 45, 47, 50.

exhibiting "rational and correct views of ethics."[9] He mentions Cicero and Seneca as adding to the further refinement of moral thought.

Enter Christianity,

> Supplying the defects and correcting the errors of morality, and establishing on the whole a grander system…From these [earlier] philosophers, ethics were delivered down to the Christian fathers with all the new motives and sanctions opened by revelation.

Then unfortunately, the newly-institutionalized Christian church went dreadfully awry, spreading not morality but bigotry. During that era, philosophers of India had a clearer and more appealing understanding of morals.[10]

Eventually, Bacon, Descartes, Cudworth, Burke, Clark, Price, Butler, Reid, Paley, Smith, and Stewart placed European Christianity on the right track again, in the form of Scottish Common Sense philosophy. This derived from Judeo-Christian morals; Emerson writes, "But in morals what is known now of the good and evil propensities of the heart, and of the modes of correcting and regulating them, was known two thousand years ago to every discerning and contemplative man…" He held:

> The most which has been done is the tracing with great precision the boundary lines of the systems in order to adapt them, more and more accurately, to the known relations of truth.

This was no small accomplishment and one that Emerson under-rated.[11]

From that improvement one useful result was that, according to Emerson, then-modern moral philosophers

> Have made their ethical writings of a more practical character than the sages of antiquity…. The moderns

[9] Ibid., 50.

[10] Ibid., 52.

[11] Ibid., 59-60.

> have substituted inquiries of deep interest for those on only speculative importance…So in morals, the first speculators were propounders of theories which they could not explain, perplexing mankind and themselves with abstruse, ill-digested systems…The moderns have struck nearer the root; they have brought in this simplification by laying down maxims in morals and proposing to introduce demonstrations from mathematical analogy.

He declares:

> In the modern systems of ethical philosophy the duties whose performance constitutes virtue are ranged under three classes; viz., those whose regard we owe to the Deity, those which we owe to others, and those which regard ourselves.[12]

With an acknowledgement to natural religion (which he also studied under Frisbie), to which he developed a much greater affinity with corresponding ideas in his classic work, *Nature* (1836), Emerson says:

> Morality founds these duties on the will of the creator as expressed in the constitution of the world, and in revelation. In ascertaining the will of God it does not always proceed on the principle that the greatest possible happiness is intended, for that this is true, we cannot know; it is judged safer to reason from *adaptation* and *analogy*.[13]

Emerson thought he saw in then-modern moral philosophy a benevolent egalitarian influence. "Moral philosophy recognizes a leveling principle which makes void the distinctions and the pride of erudition." This is evidently more true in some cultures than in others

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[12] Ibid., 60-62.

[13] Ibid., 62.

yet is perhaps the leading influence of moral philosophy, to the extent that it tends to provide equal economic opportunity to all people.[14]

Another distinguishing feature that Emerson thought he saw in morals was that

> A series of humble efforts is more meritorious than solitary miracles of virtue…. For the human mind is so constituted as to expand on extraordinary calls for sentiment and strong feeling to meet the occasion with adequate effort; and this spring will alone prompt a susceptible man to great sacrifices, even without fixed principles of virtue.[15]

Emerson's immature grasp of, or lack of conviction regarding the completeness of Scottish Common Sense philosophy as body of thought, is revealed when he writes:

> We have sketched the leading characteristics of ethical science as it is represented by modern teachers, -- by Reid, Paley, Stewart. But there have been always connected with this science disputes on the nature of happiness and of virtue…. The most ingenious theory which has been proposed to reconcile these futile speculations on this theme is Mr. Hume's who, in developing his scheme of excitability and excitement, did not attempt to prove the existence of any single splendid quality attainable by the few alone, but to establish a universal equilibrium of capacity for enjoyment and pain.[16]

Emerson, in line with the theory of intuitive moral sense, boiled down moral philosophy in all its complexities to the same thing, "a conformity to the law of conscience. It is only a dispute about words." He simplifies when writing in 1821; but as will be shown, he wasn't

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[14] Ibid., 63.

[15] Ibid., 64-65.

[16] Ibid., 65-67.

satisfied and continued to pursue this elusive subject of moral philosophy into the mid-1820s after graduating from Harvard.

In his Bowdoin Prize essay, Emerson hearkens again to Hume:

> Entrenching himself behind his system, which can find no relation between cause and effect, he wanders on till he has effaced memory, judgment, and finally, our own consciousness; and the laws of morals become idle dreams and fantasies.

If that sounds like Hume suffered from an over-active imagination, Emerson could be accused of the same since his life and thinking went on to produce a great many isolated pearls of wisdom but no coherent philosophical system. Transcendentalism was his best attempt, but it attracted few adherents except for others who, like himself, were seeking the meaning of life and could find it in no other philosophy. Idle dreams and fantasies may describe Emerson's later thinking.[17]

Emerson would have stood on firmer ground had he continued to adhere to the Scottish Common Sense philosophy. However, he was not wholly convinced this philosophy provided the final answer to questions of morals. He wrote:

> These reasonings as yet want the neatness and conclusiveness of a system, and have not been made with such complete success as to remove the terror which attached to the name of Hume.

He added:

> It has lately become prevalent to speak slightingly of this great man, either lest the ignorant should suspect him to be an overmatch for the orthodox philosophers, or in order to retaliate upon infidelity that irresistible weapon, of a *sneer*. Such a course of conduct is injudicious, for inquiry is not likely to sleep in such an age, on such a subject; and if there be formidable doubts to which no unanimous solution con be formed, it is more

[17] Ibid., 67-68.

> philosophical, as well as more manly, to ascribe to human short-sightedness its own necessary defects, for the end of all human inquiry is confessedly ignorance.

Here he gives a clue to that wide-ranging freedom of thought that caused him to adopt first one, then another *ad infinitum*, philosophical view during his life. Each contained just enough seemingly new truth to attract him, but not enough to hold him.[18]

Speaking of an abundance of popular literature in the early 1800s that featured philosophical topics, Emerson was glad to report:

> They have diffused instruction and inspired a desire in those studious of elegant literature to inquire, by unfolding in pleasing forms the excellence of virtue and by taking advantage of that principle in our nature which induces us to enjoy, with satisfaction and delight, pictures of finished virtue. They have censured the turpitude of wit and recommended virtuous feeling so artfully that the strains could not displease.

This would appear to be Emerson that aspiring journalist, rather than Emerson the scholar.[19]

Wishfully thinking, Emerson grossly over-estimated the understanding and influence of moral philosophy when he wrote in 1821:

> From these causes of the vast propagation of knowledge in the world is derived the chief advantage of modern ethics, -- that they are everywhere disseminated…. In every family of ordinary advantages in the middle ranks of life the great questions of morality are discussed with freedom and intelligence, introduced as matters of speculation but as having foundations of certainty like any other science.

It is difficult to believe that, around the dinner table, questions of ethics dominated the conversation, even among the literate upper and middle

[18] Ibid., 68-69.

[19] Ibid., 71-72.

classes. The lower class, many (probably most) of whom could not read, could scarcely have been so engaged except as they were stimulated by the preaching of the Bible.[20]

Emerson makes passing reference to what he calls

> The present advanced acquaintance with ethics on political science…But the moralist regards this commotion as the inevitable effect of the progress of knowledge which might have been foreseen almost from the invention of printing, and which must proceed, with whatever disastrous effects the crisis is attended, to the calm and secure possession of equal rights and laws which it was intended to obtain.

Again, he places undue hope in the power of the written word.[21]

Apparently realizing that he had gotten carried away for some span, Emerson wrote:

> In contemplating a science whose very object is to perfect the nature of man, imagination oversteps unconsciously the limit, to depict miraculous excellence which poetry promises and philosophy desires but dare not expect.

He should have gone back and revised his essay from the point where he began to overstep the limit, because he next says:

> The first true advance which is made must go on in the school in which Reid and Stewart have labored. Philosophers must agree in terms and discover their own ideas with regard to the moral sense, or, as others term it, the decisions of the understanding.

Here he returns to the Scottish Common Sense philosophy that Frisbie and others taught him, and almost as an after-thought adds, "The plague spot of slavery must be purged thoroughly out before any one will

[20] Ibid., 72.

[21] Ibid., 74-76.

venture to predict any great consummation." In contradiction, he also adds:

> The faith of treaties must be kept inviolate even to the partial suffering of millions…Abolishing the thousand capricious policies which dictate the conduct of states, there must be substituted the one eternal policy of moral rectitude.[22]

As one whose inner drive was to write, Emerson remarks:

> So in letters, if it is a refined study to examine and compare the literature of different nations and follow the flight of different muses, it is more refined to discover the reasons why they give pleasure, to trace the moral influence which created them, and the reciprocal influence which they claimed on morals.[23]

Emerson's closing paragraph well sums up his essay and hints at his nascent transcendentalism:

> We are justified in preferring morals to every other science; for that science has more permanent interest than any other…That which constitutes the healthy integrity of the universe should be known as far as that universe extends to the intelligences which imbibe and enjoy the benevolence of its Author.[24]

And so we have an essay for the most part beautifully written, if not always well thought-out. It is an impressive performance for one so young and discloses Emerson's potential as an exceedingly interesting writer.

Emerson's two Bowdoin Prize essays were not published until 1896, with an introduction by Edward Everett Hale who wrote:

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[22] Ibid., 76-77.

[23] Ibid., 79-80.

[24] Ibid., 81.

> In reading the two papers, I have been led to ask myself whether the careful study which, for the preparation of the first, he gave to the life of Socrates, did not do something in the direction of the studies of his junior and senior years, and so if it did not lead up to the second paper. But such speculations are hardly more than fanciful.

Speculative though such supposition may be, it is supported by the facts that Emerson studied moral philosophy under Frisbie and reserved for Frisbie the highest praise upon his death.[25]

It is important to also note that Frisbie authored four relevant papers that were published and would have been available for Emerson's reading by 1821. These are: *Inaugural Address, Delivered Upon the Author's Induction in the Office of Professor of Natural Religion, Moral Philosophy, and Civil Polity, in Harvard University* (1817); "Remarks on Tacitus" (1818); "Examination of Dr. Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments" (1819); and "Remarks on the Right and Duty of Government to Provide for the Support of Religion by Law" (1821). Daniel Walker Howe writes that Frisbie's inaugural address "became recognized as an authoritative exposition of American cultural conservatism."[26]

Emerson biographer, Ralph L. Rusk writes:

> In [Frisbie's] inaugural address, delivered and published in Ralph's freshman year, he took for granted a moral sense given by nature, but insisted that it needed as

[25] Edward Everett Hale, "Introduction," *Two Unpublished Essays* (New York: Lamson, Wolffe, & Co., 1896), 5; Edgeley Woodman Todd, "Philosophical Ideas at Harvard College, 1817-1837," *New England Quarterly*, 16 (March 1943), 63-90; Merrell R. Davis, "Emerson's 'Reason' and the Scottish Philosophers," *New England Quarterly*, 17(June 1944), 209-228.

[26] All four papers are reprinted in *A Collection of the Miscellaneous Writings of Professor Frisbie, with Some Notices of His Life and Character*, Ed. by Andrews Norton (Boston: Cummings, Hilliard, & Co., 1823); Daniel Ward Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 131.

> much cultivation as the intellect. To him it seemed clear that imaginative literature had a great share for good or evil in that cultivation.

This admonition Emerson evidently took to heart, judging by the uplifting quality of his writings.

Frisbie's inaugural address validated all that eventually became vital to Emerson as a writer. Frisbie said:

> Those compositions in poetry and prose, which constitute the literature of a nation, the essay, the drama, the novel, it cannot be doubted, have a most extensive and powerful operation upon the moral feelings and character of the age. The very business of the authors of such works is directly or indirectly with the heart. Even descriptions of natural scenery owe much of their beauty and interest to the moral associations they awaken."

Lawrence I. Buell states:

> For as religion became for liberal Unitarians more and more a matter of moral and spiritual improvement, the causes of religion and art became increasingly related, until, in Emerson, art came to be seen as a more appropriate expression of the religious spirit than organized religion itself.[27]

Rusk observes: "The death of Professor Frisbie, Waldo's former teacher, may have had something to do with a strong upsurge of [Emerson's] interest in the problem of the moral Sense." Mary Kupiec Caton asserts:

> Just as Emerson's early reflections on the lawfulness of nature were derived from a well-established Unitarian perspective, so did his elaborate definitions of the moral

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[27] Frisbie, 17 (Norton, ed.); Lawrence I. Buell, "Unitarian Aesthetics and Emerson's Poet-Priest," *American Quarterly*, 20 (Spring 1968), 4.

> Sense grow out of what he had learned from Frisbie at Harvard.[28]

Emerson and some others of his era sought a philosophy higher than the Scottish Common Sense, and it acquired the name, "Over-Soul" or transcendentalism. Stow Persons writes:

> American transcendentalism took two principal forms of expression: literary and religious – the essay and the sermon. It was Emerson who perfected the essay form. Many of these essays had actually been written for oral delivery as lectures. They were, in fact, lay sermons. The erstwhile Unitarian clergyman confessed that he had abandoned the pulpit for the lecture platform because he found in the latter a more congenial and sympathetic environment in which to testify to his own unique form of spiritual ecstasy.

Lawrence I. Buell opines:

> The profession of letters, in short, gave Emerson more freedom than the Unitarian ministry…. But in particular, lectures, essays, and poetry appealed to Emerson aesthetically, as necessarily more imaginative than sermons and tracts.[29]

While Frisbie's moral philosophy was based on the Bible, he construed moral philosophy broadly. In his inaugural address he indicated he would have reference to "all those studies and inquiries, which have for their object the knowledge and improvement of the moral condition of man." Such breadth could be said to characterize Emerson's

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[28] Rusk, 81, 96; Mary Kupiec Cayton, *Emerson's Emergence: Self and Society in the Transformation of New England, 1800-1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 60.

[29] Stow Persons, *American Minds: A History of Ideas* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1958), 209; Buell, 18.

own evolving thought about the moral Sense and the views expressed in his writings over many years.[30]

Emerson's approach did not originate with Frisbie, who was mainly expositing the thought of Scottish Common Sense philosopher Dugald Stewart (1753-1828). Frisbie was joined by Professor Levi Hedge, who taught "Metaphysis" using Stewart's two-volume *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (1818) as a textbook. Hedge briefly succeeded Frisbie as Alford Professor of Natural Religion, Moral Philosophy, and Civil Polity. In any event, it was Stewart, by way of Frisbie and Hedge, to whom Emerson was most indebted for inspiration. Moreover, Emerson read at least one other work by Stewart, *Outlines of Moral Philosophy* (1793), outside the curriculum, according to his record of books he read.[31]

Frisbie and Emerson recognized that Stewart owed much to Thomas Reid. D.H. Meyer observes, "It was, indeed, Reid and Stewart whom Emerson picked out for special praise in his undergraduate essay, 'Ethical Philosophy,' in 1821." Clearly, Emerson had many sources of inspiration throughout his life and career as a lecturer and writer. However, when at Harvard, the trait of man known as "moral sense" came to the understanding of Emerson primarily via his mentor, Levi Frisbie, Jr.[32]

Cayton comments that

> Emerson's philosophical and ethical approach to social problems in the spring of 1822 was not necessarily new, nor was it uniquely his own…. From the summer of 1823 through the midwinter of 1825, his journals show a thoughtful and methodical concern with moral and ethical issues.

Emerson possessed a copy of Norton's edition of Frisbie's *Miscellaneous Writings...* (1823), which included not only Frisbie's most noteworthy published writings, but also memorial tributes and extracts of lecture

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[30] Frisbie, 4 (Norton, ed.)

[31] Davis, 217, footnote 19.

[32] D. H. Meyer, *The Instructed Conscience: The Shaping of the American National Ethic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 37.

notes from subjects discussed in his classes. Thus Emerson had a ready reference and constant reminder over the years of much of what Frisbie taught him.[33]

Though Frisbies's *Miscellaneous Writings…* are permeated throughout with diverse aspects of the moral sense, the section titled, "Rational Principles," seems to come closest to capturing its essence in a few pages. This section focuses on four rational principles: Regard to our own happiness on the whole, or self-love, sense of duty, piety, and moral taste.

Frisbie holds that the first, regard to our own happiness on the whole, or self-love,

> Is to provide for our good on the whole, by the regulation, balancing, and use of the primary appetites, desires, and affections…. For it is essential to society, that each individual should take a reasonable care of himself; and we accordingly approve such rational regard to one's self, and condemn the want of it.[34]

By the second, sense of duty, Frisbie means: "We perceive actions to be right; others, wrong…. Acting therefore from a regard to the rectitude of actions is acting from a sense of duty."[35]

The third, piety, Frisbie says,

> is distinct from the preceding principles, even from a sense of duty. The sense of duty existed in the minds of Heathens without reference to the will of God. At the present day, however, with the light which Christians enjoy, piety enters into, sanctifies, and elevates all the principles of right action.[36]

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[33] Cayton, 40, 43; for an extensive treatment of Emerson's instruction in the moral sense, see Merrell, 209-228.

[34] Frisbie, 192-193 (Norton, ed.).

[35] Ibid., 193.

[36] Ibid., 195.

As to moral taste, the fourth rational principle and its discussion much the longest, Frisbie asserts:

> It is in literature, that taste, in the more common use of the word, has it most extensive sphere, and most varied gratifications; yet whether it be exercised on nature, the fine arts, or literature, we are aware how much depends on associations with life, feeling, and human character…. Moral taste, then, is a quick sensibility to right and wrong. It perceives and enjoys whatever is generous, elevated, or true in character and conduct, especially in their more refined and uncommon displays; and is offended with all that is selfish, debasing, or false. Its province is not merely the observation of the actions of others; it is at once the watchful guardian and the highest reward of personal virtue…. In a word, the advances which one may have made in moral worth, may be in a great measure graduated by the sensibility and refinement of this faculty.

Surely these four principles, especially piety and moral taste, must have helped to build the foundation of Emerson's personal philosophy and creative endeavors intended to help achieve the moral perfectibility of mankind.[37]

Frisbie held Harvard's first Alford professorship for only five years. His near-blindness and the brevity of his time in the post limited the quantity of his scholarly contributions and, as a result, have caused him to be under-recognized for the quality of what he contributed. Daniel Walker Howe writes, "In his lifetime Frisbie was respected for his piety, acumen, and taste, but posterity had forgotten him."[38]

Who was this man, Levi Frisbie, Jr.? Some background on Frisbie's life and education will help to understand the man and what he brought to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Levi Frisbie, Jr., was the second of four children born to Levi and Mehitable Hale Frisbie. He was born September 15, 1783, at Ipswich, Massachusetts, where his father was for many years pastor of the First Congregational Church. Levi, Sr. (1748-

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[37] Ibid., 197, 199.

[38] Howe, 13.

1806), born at Bradford, Connecticut, prepared for college by studying under Congregationalist pastors Eleazar Wheelock and Joseph Bellamy. Levi, Sr. studied at Yale College for three years beginning in 1767. When Wheelock founded Dartmouth College in 1770, Levi, Sr., transferred to Dartmouth and was one of four students in the new college's first graduating class (1771). During the next five years he first studied for the ministry and, following his ordination in 1772, did missionary work among the Indians in Ohio, Maine, and Canada. His missionary work was ended by the Revolutionary War, and 1776 he began his thirty-year tenure as pastor at Ipswich.

Levi, Jr., prepared for college at Phillips Academy, Andover, entering at the age of 12 in 1796 when Mark Newman was principal. Upon completing his preparatory studies, he entered Harvard in 1798. While a student at Harvard, to earn money he taught school during winter vacations. Upon graduating from Harvard with his A.B. in 1802, he taught school at Concord for a year.

Frisbie desired to undertake further study and become a lawyer. Unfortunately, an affliction of his eyes forced him to give up that ambition. He could no longer read for himself and relied on the kindness of friends and students to read important writings to him. By this means he managed to keep sufficiently current with the literature of his time. He managed to write by means of a special device that guided his hand. So profound a thinker was he, so capable a teacher, so well read, and so adept at using his writing aid, that he was fully capable of performing the duties of a Harvard professor.

Frisbie came onto the Harvard staff as a tutor in Latin in 1805. he also was a graduate student and, in 1806, received his A.M. with a thesis titled, "Calculation and Projection of a Solar Eclipse."

In 1811 Frisbie was named Professor of Latin, remaining in that capacity until 1817. During this period, on September 10, 1815, he married Catharine Saltonstall Mellen of Barnstable, daughter of Rev. John Mellen, Jr., a Harvard alumnus and Congregational minister. Levi and Catharine had only one child, a daughter who died in infancy.

Andres Norton and Samuel Sewall recalled that at Harvard in the early 1800s, there was a Theological Society of which they and Frisbie were members. The society evidently was formed circa 1804 or 1805; since Frisbie then was present at Harvard he may have been among the founding members. While organized for the benefit of theological students mainly, others at Harvard who were interested in religion (such

as Frisbie) also joined in. They met one evening each week, either in the rooms of members or in a hired room in Cambridge. The meetings opened with prayer, a lesson from the Scriptures was read, followed by the reading of a sermon or essay prepared by each member in his turn and discussed by members attending, and the meetings closed with prayer. This society became a close-knit circle of friends who greatly enjoyed each other's company, not only at the weekly meeting but also as frequent opportunities for contact arose during the week.[39]

Training of men to be clergymen had been central to Harvard's curriculum since the institution's founding in 1636. Starting in 1811, theological students were instructed apart from the regular college courses. In 1816 a constitution was drawn for the nascent Harvard Theological Seminary, and in 1819 a Faculty of Theology was designated, consisting of Harvard president John T. Kirkland and four professors; Levi Frisbie, Andrews Norton, Henry Ware, Sr., and Sidney Willard.

Frisbie taught Natural Religion and Ethics to the theological students. Professor John Farrar, in an obituary written for the Boston *Daily Advertiser*, said of Frisbie:

> He took a lively interest in the theological discussions of the day, and made up his mind upon controverted points, with great candour and deliberation, and was exerting the happiest influence in the theological school, in which he took an important part.[40]

In 1821 Frisbie contracted tuberculosis. He died, greatly respected and much lamented in Cambridge, Massachusetts, July 9, 1822.

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[39] Andrews Norton, "Memoir," Frisbie, xvii-xx (Norton, ed.); Samuel Sewall, "John Lovejoy Abbot," in Sprague, 422-423; Conrad Wright, "The Early Period (1811-1840)," in George Hunston Williams, ed., *The Harvard Divinity School: Its Place in Harvard University and in American Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1954), 62-63.

[40] John Farrar, "Professor Frisbie," *Christian Register*, Boston, August 9, 1822; extracted from the Boston *Daily Advertiser*, July 13, 1822.