

The Centrality of the Center in Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Circles"

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Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, "Circles," is both a spiritual and an epistemological treatise. It has its roots in his distinction between two types of knowledge--Understanding and Reason. Understanding is the faculty of the intellect by which one apprehends the natural world; it allows one to classify, differentiate, compare, and so forth. Reason, on the other hand, encompasses Understanding but exceeds it because it is the intuitive faculty of the soul and "is not to be distinguished from the divine Essence" (JMN 270).¹ As Emerson writes in one of his notebooks, "St. Paul marks the distinction by the terms 'Natural Man' and 'Spiritual Man'" (JMN 273). In our time, the difference has been noted by Fritjof Capra, who writes, "Throughout history, it has been recognized that the human mind is capable of two kinds of knowledge, or two modes of consciousness, which have often been termed the rational and the intuitive and have traditionally been associated with science and religion, respectively" (14). "Circles" never specifically addresses the terms Understanding and Reason, but the failure to comprehend or to accept the distinction can result in unfortunate misreadings of one of Emerson's finest works.

"Circles" begins with an appeal to the reader's Understanding. The circle is introduced as the "primary figure" in nature and is shown to be emblematic of change because "there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning." This is symbolized in the statement that "around every circle another can be drawn" (CW II.179). In the body of the essay Emerson goes on to demonstrate this in a number of ways, all of which are easily comprehended by the Understanding--the progressions of mechanical knowledge, of human relationships, of conversation, and of literature. Curiously, what can be overlooked is Emerson's appeal to Reason in the first paragraph. He subtly interjects the statement that "St. Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere, and its circumference nowhere" (CW II.179). What does this mean? Can the Understanding grasp this concept? Strangely, the commentators on "Circles" pass over this sentence, the third sentence in

¹ The citation, JMN, refers to The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson; CW refers to The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. (See Works Cited.)

the essay, with little or no mention. This is a mistake because the equation of divinity with the image of the center is central to Emerson's project in "Circles."

Emerson's journals reveal that he found this idea quoted in An Essay Towards the Theory of the Ideal or Intelligible World by John Norris, but he may have misidentified its original source (JMN 57). Edward W. Taylor contends that the idea "has its origin in the second definition of twenty-four in the twelfth-century, pseudo-hermetic Liber xxiv philosophorum" (169, n. 6). Regardless of its source, this concept is recognized as a hermetical commonplace which has intrigued thoughtful people for centuries, including Nicholas of Cusa, Thomas Traherne, Sir Thomas Browne, and Pascal (Norford 412-13). Let us put our Understanding to work on the statement. When one contemplates the center, it becomes clear that every material object has a center. Whether the object be the smallest subatomic particle or the largest galaxy, a mathematical center can be determined (theoretically). This mathematical center is a point which is nonspatial and timeless. This is so because the nature of space and time is difference, and the exact center must necessarily be devoid of all differentiation. Thus, it follows that all centers are the same, the center is one because it admits of no differentiation. Likewise, if the circumference is nowhere, it is also nonspatial and timeless, meaning undifferentiated. Thus, the center and the circumference are one and the same. This is about as far as the Understanding can go. It is bound and befuddled by the paradox. How can many centers be one? How can the center and the circumference be the same? If this is a description of God, how can God be in the center of each and every thing and at the same time encompass them? Does this mean that God is immanent and transcendent at the same time? Furthermore, if the universe is something, then that which transcends it, is outside it, must be nothing. Is God nothing? The more the Understanding grapples with the idea, the more the paradoxes pile up.

Emerson eventually comes back to the paradox of the center in the final pages of "Circles," and we see its importance when he says that the fluidity of the universe "could never become sensible to us, but by contrast to some principle of fixture or stability in the soul. Whilst the eternal generation of circles proceeds, the eternal generator abides. That central life is somewhat superior to creation, superior to knowledge and thought, and contains all its circles" (CW II.188). Harold Bloom misreads this passage when he asserts that "At the center of Emerson's central mind is a point where no change can come, but this point is not in itself a final excellence or central truth" (59). Bloom is forgetting Emerson's introduction of God as center and circumference at the outset of the essay.

Here, in fact, Emerson is informing the reader that only by the intuitive apprehension of some principle of changelessness are we able to apprehend the constant change which we call nature. Thus, Reason, our intuitive connection with divinity, is what enables us to know our world. He identifies this “principle” as a power--a “generator”-- and a superlative life which “abides” at the center of all while simultaneously containing all. The use of the word “abide” connotes permanence; thus, this power is beyond nature, which is impermanent. This “principle” then is what Emerson calls “God” in the beginning of the essay. The implication is that because all people are sensible of change we know that all people possess Reason or, rather, are possessed by it. Emerson says as much elsewhere when he writes that Reason “is in all men, even in the worst, & constitutes them men. In bad men it is dormant; in the good efficient, But it is perfect and identical in all, underneath the peculiarities, the vices, & the errors of the individual” (JMN 272 - emphasis mine). Here he equates Reason with God because it is “perfect” and “identical in all”; that is, it is the omnipresent center. True wisdom, then, would consist of trusting in and developing one’s Reason because this is the way to become attuned to the divinity, the perfect, at one’s center.

Emerson’s stated purpose in “Circles” is to “unsettle” his readers (CW II.188). Why? What does it mean to be settled? It means to believe that knowledge is a function of Understanding alone. It means to deny Reason by believing that what one now thinks is fixed and final or that such fixity is possible in the relativity of space and time. The effect of being settled is “to solidify, and hem in the life” (CW II.181). This is a state abhorrent to nature because it is contrary to the demonstrable fluidity and volatility of nature. According to Emerson, “We call it by many names,--fever, intemperance, insanity, stupidity, and crime: they are all forms of old age: they are rest, conservatism, appropriation, inertia, not newness, not the way onward” (CW II.188-89). Thus, when Yvor Winters claims to demonstrate Emerson’s position by contending that “My impulse to commit incest may horrify you; your impulse to commit murder and arson may horrify me; but we should ignore each other and proceed” (582), he is thoroughly misreading Emerson. The impulses in Winters’ example are crimes, and Emerson clearly identifies crime as unnatural, as being settled. These are not actions which could result from Reason because they are not spontaneous. They could only result from calculation, some psychological fixation, or intoxication, in other words, from being settled; they could only find their source in Understanding. Emerson would have us trust our Reason which puts us in touch with our divine center. Only then is one safe to sacrifice one’s prudence (CW II.186).

Emerson believes moral action will result from such trust because, as he writes in “Nature,” “The moral law lies at the centre of nature and radiates to the circumference” (CW I.26). Returning to Winters, he claims that Emerson would have us become passive “automaton[s]” devoid of free will (583). This is absurd because the fundamental choice is the choice to be unsettled, the choice to trust Reason. The ability to make this choice “depends on the force or truth of the individual soul.” This is the active soul, the soul that is “quick and strong,” the soul that “refuses to be imprisoned” and settled--hardly an automaton (CW II.180-81).

Winters misreads because he reads with his Understanding; consequently, he is unable to be comfortable with the paradoxes that abound in “Circles.” He does not have Keats’s “negative capability.” Readers of “Circles” must read with their Reason, and it appears from the structure of the essay that Emerson may be trying to assist his readers to accomplish this. Although Emerson does not seem to have been acquainted with Zen Buddhism (Detweiler 423), the effect of “Circles” is very much koan-like. Capra’s description of koans is oversimplified, but nonetheless, it describes well the effect of reading “Circles” carefully:

Koans are carefully devised nonsensical riddles which are meant to make the student of Zen realize the limitations of logic and reasoning in the most dramatic way. The irrational wording and paradoxical content of these riddles makes it impossible to solve them by thinking. They are designed precisely to stop the thought process and thus to make the student ready for the nonverbal experience of reality. (35)

The “limitations of logic” are shown at the very beginning of Emerson’s essay as we try to conceptualize the center which is everywhere. Also, Emerson is aware of the value of the “nonverbal.” He writes, “Good as is discourse, silence is better, and shames it” (CW II.184). The Understanding is limited in its ability to apprehend reality. According to Emerson, “The field cannot be well seen from within the field” (CW II.185). By unsettling the Understanding, one begins to step outside its field in order to dwell in Reason. For Emerson, this is the function of the poet: “He smites and arouses me with his shrill tones, breaks up my whole chain of habits, and I open my eye on my own possibilities” (CW II.185). In this sense, “Circles” is probably Emerson’s most poetic text.

But “Circles” does more than attempt to unsettle us. Emerson also offers some advice about how we can center ourselves in Reason. According to Emerson, “The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire, is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal

memory, and to do something without knowing how or why; in short, to draw a new circle. [. . .] The way of life is wonderful: it is by abandonment” (CW II.190). Emerson’s advice is “abandonment,” “to forget ourselves.” He expresses this differently in his journal when he writes, “The victory is won as soon as any soul has learned always to take sides with Reason against himself; to transfer his Me from his person, his name, his interests, back upon Truth & Justice [. . .]” (JMN 391). This is the belief that our material selves are illusory, that there is a real self that is One with all and which can be known by ego annihilation, the belief that it is possible to transcend the world of appearance in order to know the Unity of all is integral to the Eastern mystical tradition. Is Emerson then a proponent of this Eastern tradition? Frederic Ives Carpenter feels that “although many of Emerson’s specific ideas found reinforcement in the Hindu Scriptures, most of them had been originally derived or created from other sources” (153-54). Chief among these other sources were the Bible and the Neoplatonists, particularly Plotinus (50). Emerson then, with his grounding in Western thought, is not proposing the Eastern goal of absorption into the One. Rather, he advocates abandonment to Reason in order “to draw a new circle.” As B. L. Packer points out, this is a dual abandonment--abandonment of the “ossified circumference of past thoughts” [i.e. Understanding] and abandonment to the “central principle of life” [i.e. Reason] (136). Emerson would stay in the world but let Reason reign because “I am a Becoming. So do I less sever or divide the One” (JMN 468). He expresses this in “Circles” when he says that the power at our center forever “labors to create a life and thought as large and excellent as itself,” for “that which is made, instructs how to make a better” (CW II.188). Yet, to truly be a Becoming, the person must know the One at her center. In this Emerson is in agreement with the Eastern tradition.

Emerson’s readers need to understand that his ideas, which I believe are centered in “Circles,” are not only very similar to the Eastern mystical tradition but are also deeply rooted in the Western Neoplatonic and Biblical traditions. Emerson shows us his Western roots when he says that “the instinct of man [Reason] presses eagerly onward to the impersonal and illimitable” and links this statement to a Biblical text of Paul’s--“that God may be all in all” (CW II.185-86). Here we have another way of stating the center/circumference paradox which we began with. It is the idea that God is both immanent and transcendent--is all and is in all simultaneously. Western mystics have long known this. For example, Meister Eckhart [1260-1329] writes in one of his sermons that “God is in all things. The more he is in things, the more he is outside of them; the more he is within, the more he

is outside” (qtd. in Schurmann 181). The Dominican theologian, Matthew Fox, also quotes Eckhart as writing that “God created all things in such a way that they are not outside himself, as ignorant people falsely imagine. Rather, all creatures flow outward, but nonetheless remain within God” (88).² Furthermore, Julian of Norwich [1342-1415] writes, “We are in God and God, whome we do not see, is in us” (qtd. in Fox 89). Apparently, Emerson did not know these mystics’ written meditations, but something he was later to write in “The Transcendentalist” sounds very similar:

His experience inclines him to behold the procession of facts you call the world, as flowing perpetually outward from an invisible, unsounded centre in himself, centre alike of him and of them, and necessitating him to regard all things as having a subjective or relative existence, relative to that aforesaid Unknown Centre of him.
(CW I.203)

We see, then, that in writing “Circles” Emerson has presented ideas common to both East and West, and the central point is the center, the symbol of the Unity of all.

One final point should be made about “Circles.” Emerson’s ideas expressed there are not some fanciful, romantic notion with no bearing on reality. They are granted a stamp of validity if one realizes the affinity between the mystical tradition and modern physics, as set forth by Fritjof Capra in his book The Tao of Physics. A brief statement of Capra’s thesis is as follows:

The most important characteristic of the Eastern world view--one could almost say the essence of it--is the awareness of the unity and mutual interrelation of all things and events, the experience of all phenomena in the world as manifestations of a basic oneness. [. . .]

The basic oneness of the universe is not only the central characteristic of the

² It is interesting to note another passage from Meister Eckhart’s sermons: “The masters say: The mind has two faces. The upper face beholds God incessantly, and the lower face looks a little towards the below and directs the senses. The upper face, however, which is the peak of the mind, stands in eternity. It has nothing to do with time; it is ignorant of time as well as of the body” (qtd. in Schurmann 57). The similarity of Eckhart’s “two faces” to Emerson’s Reason and Understanding distinction is apparent. Schurmann finds that Eckhart is here echoing a passage from Augustine on the Trinity (70).

mystical experience, but is also one of the most important revelations of modern physics. (116-17)

It would take a book to trace all the similarities between what Emerson writes in “Circles” and the world’s mystical traditions. The important point is that Reason, what Capra calls intuitive knowledge, is validated by the fact that what the mystics have for centuries been saying about the nature of the world, to the scorn and laughter of Western science, is being continually proven correct today by the findings of physicists working with quantum and relativity theories (Capra 293-98).

I began by saying that “Circles” is both a spiritual and an epistemological treatise. The essay is spiritual in that it aims to help readers get in touch with the divinity at their center. It is epistemological in that the way to accomplish this is by comprehending the way humans know. One could say that for Emerson the Fall of Man is a fall into Understanding. The failure to heed Reason’s intuitions brings about limitation, and for Emerson, “The only sin is limitation” (CW II.182). The answer then is to acknowledge the centrality of Reason and to be guided in all actions by its whisperings--a difficult task to be sure, but not totally impossible. A good place to start is to read “Circles” closely and then take the time to contemplate the paradox of the center. After all, the center is the base of Reason and even modern science has shown the value of its intuitions. Consequently, it would behoove one to know one’s center if one hopes to ever act rightly in this world of change and limitation--at least, that is what I hear Emerson saying in “Circles.”

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