

Emerson on Circles

Conversation is a game of circles.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Emerson loves circles, and circular words. A computer scan through his writings for the word *circle* yields 17 different pieces of writing. Related words and phrases would likely show up in *every* essay: circulate, circumscribe, circumstance, circuit, circumference, limit, unit, universe, revolve, revolution, globe, ball, around. *Circles* is Emerson's tenth essay in his collection *Essays, First Series*. Only a few sentences from the beginning, Emerson assumes this to be a theme of ongoing interest for his reader as well.

One moral we have already deduced, in considering the circular or compensatory character of every human action. Another analogy we shall now trace; that every action admits of being outdone.

When exactly *did* we consider “the circular or compensatory character of every human action”? Would it have been in the third essay, *Compensation*?

What we call retribution is the universal necessity by which the whole appears wherever a part appears.

Every opinion reacts on him who utters it. It is a thread-ball thrown at a mark, but the other end remains in the thrower's bag.

No doubt, these ideas fit his description precisely. But that is already 100 pages ago, before six intervening essays of thick poetic-philosophical reading. Can he expect us to still be responsible for that material? How many of us, or Emerson's contemporary readers, in truth, have read his essays consecutively?

Maybe he *isn't* specifically referring to *Compensation*; maybe he only wishes us to turn back a few pages to the preceding essay, that wonderful exposition of mystical thought, *The Over-Soul*. There he describes the divine inspiration of the “grandly simple” mind, whose spontaneous abundance makes all of literature look like word-catching.

. . . it is like gathering a few pebbles off the ground, or bottling a little air in a phial, when the whole earth and the whole atmosphere are ours. Nothing can pass there, or make you one of the circle, but the casting aside of your trappings, and dealing man to man in naked truth, plain confession, and omniscient affirmation.

Here Emerson is expressing a different, albeit related idea. Completing a circle is analogous to fulfilling a commitment. There are conditions of purity and naked simplicity to be met, before divine inspiration would be ours. The circle, as the simplest of geometric figures (the revolved image of a point) mirrors simplicity of character.

In the essay *Spiritual Laws* the virtue of spontaneity is celebrated.

A little consideration of what takes place around us every day would show us, that a higher law than that of our will regulates events; that our painful labors are unnecessary, and fruitless; that only in our easy, simple, spontaneous action are we strong, and by contenting ourselves with obedience we become divine. Belief and love, — a believing love will relieve us of a vast load of care.

My eye fell on this passage because of the word *around* in the first sentence (which you might think is a stretched connection to *circle*). Of course, this passage can be related to the “grandly simple” mind of the previous passage. Spontaneity is one of Emerson’s chief “doctrines”, and is explored frequently in this series of essays. Spontaneity is the free life of the soul, expressed only when the mind has shrugged off the “chain of habit” that circumscribes its perspectives.

In the essay *Love* we find these words about expansion and growth.

[Love] is a fire that, kindling its first embers in the narrow nook of a private bosom, caught from a wandering spark out of another private heart, glows and enlarges until it warms and beams upon multitudes of men and women, upon the universal heart of all, and so lights up the whole world and all nature with its generous flames.

This is a page torn from Plato. In the dialogue *The Symposium* the priestess Diotima describes a ‘ladder of love’ that fondly supports the footsteps of beauty from the dear to the true, from the special to the general, from the personal to the impersonal. Who can read this passage and not think of expanding wave circles on the surface of a pond?

The essay on *Friendship* states the following:

A man who stands united with his thought conceives magnificently of himself. He is conscious of a universal success, even though bought by uniform particular failures.

These sentences are quoted from a passage where Emerson insists that self-respect must be the foundation for the mutual respect demanded by friendship. Self-respect is another central and repeated theme in these essays. Emerson thought that we surrender our innate power and guidance when we traffic in the image-making of personal egoism. We get caught up in a sense of identity that is external, that is primarily an object for others. There was something else, however, about this passage that reminded me of circles. If you draw a pencil circle with a compass on paper, and then you examine the line with a good magnifying glass, you would see many imperfections in the line. Thus, the circle is completed “by uniform particular failures.”

From *Prudence*: “Do not clutch at sensual sweetness before it is ripe on the slow tree of cause and effect.” Cause and effect are two halves of the very important circle of action, according to Emerson. In one place, he describes this as “the law of like attracts like.”

From *Heroism*: “There seems to be no interval between greatness and meanness. When the spirit is not master of the world, then it is its dupe.” A circle divides the plane into two, and only two areas: inside and outside. Any point is one or the other, there is no interval between.

As you can gather by now, Dear Reader, a circle can be drawn around all of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s writings, and many smaller circles can be located within. My *brief* survey of the seven essays that precede *Circles* is intended to illustrate that Emerson may well have been referring, at the start of that essay, to the *drift* of thought in all of the first nine essays in *First Series*. Three distinct ideas, however, stand out to me:

1. The notion of inherent moral justice expressed in *Compensation*; “the circular character of human action.”
2. The potential, in every human being, for intellectual and moral perfection, when the human mind completes the *circuit* of conscious union with divinity.
3. Self-transcendence. “Every action admits of being outdone.” Every circumstance is a circumscription whose inertia must be rebelled against by the spirit. This is the central theme in *Circles*.

Perhaps these three circles interlace, as in the Celtic emblem. But I can’t figure out that on my own. I will need all of your help. So please read the essay *Circles*, and join us for a two hour forum. If you are inclined, I would recommend skimming *Compensation* and *The Over-Soul* as well. I look forward to your responses to the essay, and your own thoughts about this simple, most pervasive, and mysterious of shapes. Remember, *conversation is a game of circles*. Perhaps you have the key that will help me to see past my own Saturnine rings.

Joe Miller
Forum Host