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Entries Into The Circular Self

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Philosophical Perspectives on Emerson and Ashwini Bhat

by Stephen S. Bush

The geometer's circle is a perfect abstraction, a static and timeless singularity. The naturalist prefers ripples on a pond: plural, overlapping, and dynamic. Throughout their histories, much of philosophy and art have sided with the geometer, regarding the eternal form as more real, more substantial. This perspective denounces the transitional for its decay and change; it sees permanence as superior.

In his essay "Circles," Ralph Waldo Emerson takes a different approach. He says, "Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens."



Rings of Saturn

In speaking of these curved shapes, Emerson spurs us to think about our self, and the nature of our responsibility for it. But is it an abnegation of duty to do so? Aren't the urgent problems we face collective matters of justice and public goods, violence and exclusion? And yet, comes the Emersonian response, what access to the social and political do we have except through the self? What do we care about, when do we act, with whom, and for the sake of what? These questions are fundamental to one's engagement in the world, and they are questions about what sort of self one is. It is difficult to focus on one's self in the right way, to give the right sort of attention without settling into sham self-advancement, the narcissism of taking ourselves as seats of individual pleasure and happiness.

An alternative to the options of unreflexivity and egoism emerges in the work of contemporary sculptor, Ashwini Bhat, in dialogue with the writings of Emerson, as they both reflect on the circular.

Emerson does so wrestling with a formidable opponent, the platonic legacy in philosophy. Plato granted absolute priority to immaterial ideals over the natural world. For him, the various things we perceive have their significance in their resemblance, however imperfect, to the ideal form. The form is the perfect and unattainable version of perceptible objects. Plato distinguished between matter and

idea, and he sided with the timeless eternal over the world of transition, and put his stamp on centuries of philosophy and theology. In his train, Western intellectuals regarded the body and its emotions as impediments that keep the mind and its reasoning abilities from ascending to the contemplation of spiritual matters.

Emerson was drawn to many features of this philosophy. He agreed with Plato that we need to attend, in a contemplative state of mind, to ideals. He thought, like Plato, that we are responsible to form ourselves in a life-long project of self-cultivation. Our lives are analogous to a work of art, each of us is both artist and material, as we shape ourselves in accordance with the ideals by which we live. For Plato, we do so by attending to beauty, truth, and goodness, as they appear in nature but then as they are in themselves. Emerson agreed, but he prized what Plato disdained, the flux of the natural world. Emerson still held out for a transcendent realm of value and beauty, but he embraced generation and degeneration, growth and change. While Plato could only approve of eternal immobility, Emerson exulted in the fact that “there are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile.”



Unknot

Bhat too revels in fluidity. We see this in her *Rings of Saturn* series and *Unknot* series. Her circles stretch and twist; they are eccentric and ecstatic, elongating irregularly, driven by some imperceptible interior force to exceed their own boundaries. Energy is characteristic of her work in general. Various forces are involved: kinetic, gravitational, spiritual, regal, geothermal, and erotic, in different cases. The energy inherent in the circle sculptures propels them out of symmetry and centeredness.

It would be easy to subsume Bhat to one or another category. Before sculpting, she was a professional dancer, and her work evidences disciplined techniques of posture and movement. She is Indian, and she finds inspiration in the religion, flora, and domestic design of her native country. She is a woman, and her sculptures assert feminist composure. She is trained in literature, and her art exhibits a poetic sensibility.

What these qualities do not fully capture, however, is the studiousness of her work. Her sculptures inquire into fundamental questions about humanity, aspiration, limitation, love, desire, inter-relationality, and mortality. Humor is not absent from her art, but more often than not, her pieces speak in serious tones; they are philosophical. Bhat's circular sculptures eschew whimsy, irony, and critical negation to articulate a vision for a positive relationship to human values. In an era when increasingly the only measure of worth is monetary, we have urgent need, in addition to critique, for statements of what it means to apprehend non-instrumental values.

Bhat's circles go a step beyond Emerson. Despite his love for the unruly material world, he could never quite turn his back on super-nature, the transcendent. Bhat's artwork emphasizes materiality at every turn. Clay, as a material, is especially cognizant of the earth, and Bhat's glazes enhance the earthiness of clay, giving us tones of soil, dirt, and rock. Indeed, some of her pieces are constructed to appear as found objects, such as rocks or fossils. She has mini-assemblages that incorporate rocks and organic material. The terrestrial themes of her sculptures, in combination with their humanistic sensibility, emphasize the fundamental embeddedness of humans in their geologic environs and the continuities between humanity and nature. By grounding human concerns so thoroughly in the dirt—used here as a term of approbation—Bhat's sculptures speak of thoroughly immanent value.



One over Two

Bhat's circles do not reach toward a transcendent form of circleness, they testify too much of their earthliness. But they nevertheless refer to an ideal that exceeds their form. Their asymmetry is only recognizable as a contrast to symmetry. They call perfection to mind. In doing so, they speak of the self-cultivation so central to both Plato and Emerson. This ascent is a disciplined pursuit of ideals. A task that requires that one be unsatisfied with one's present degree of achievement. We are driven to better ourselves, to renew ourselves, to cast suspicion on what we take for granted, the status quo of our life. Our calcified character and the achievements that we come by easily keep us from new standards of ethical and aesthetic judgment. Our settled personality is simultaneously the necessary platform from which we must outdo ourselves and the greatest obstacle to doing so. "Step by step we scale this mysterious ladder," Emerson says. He lays upon his reader the duty to expend a "continual effort to raise himself above himself, to work a pitch above his last height": "On all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end." We long for security and stability, but in those subsist self-enclosure and contraction. To conceive of self-cultivation as expansion is to reject the moralism and dogmatism of a pre-given telos, it is to give individuals the responsibility of ascertaining and realizing the ideals that will guide their behavior. It is to reject narrow, centripetal concerns of self-fulfillment and personal happiness for a centrifugal movement that is concerned with justice and one's relations to the social and

natural world. Emerson and Bhat would have us “unsettle all things,” to dislodge ourselves from the familiar in reaching for new ways of thinking, acting, and sensing.

Unlike Emerson, in Bhat’s sculptures the pursuit of unattained ideals is a thoroughly natural endeavor, without recourse to transcendent standards. Our ideals are *our* ideals, not ones that have dropped into our laps from a heavenly beyond. We institute them in imagination and action. But, like Emerson, there are ideals, and even if they are ours, they surpass and exceed our knowledge and attainment of them. We cannot participate in them unless we extend our reach beyond its present ambit.

Bhat has a distinct benevolence toward our present selves. Emerson at times treats our current self as though it is an adversary: the merely good, which forecloses the best. Some passages of his writing evidence something that approaches consecrated self-hatred in its dissatisfaction with our limits. Emerson intends criticism of ourselves and our fellows to spur us onward. The circles in *Unknot*, like Emerson’s, push upward and expand outward, but her work accommodates the present moment, the situation as it presently stands. Her circles are deformed at places. As her circles turn back on themselves, the ridges that traverse the edge gracefully spiral, but then degrade into a thick, formless mass. The loop closes on itself incongruously. Unexpected indentations create pockets of lack. The work does not deride the imperfect for the sake of the perfect, rather it embraces what is unshapely. A productive, appealing exchange transpires between the sculptures’ buoyant, smooth elasticity and the indistinct lumps that thicken at the circles’ base. The emotional ballast that impedes our personal projects of self-creation is painful, sometimes shameful, but Bhat’s sculptures remind us we are only human, and we are acceptable as such, even as she urges us, with Emerson, to extend ourselves toward the “Unattainable, the flying Perfect.”

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Stephen S. Bush is an associate professor of religious studies at Brown University, where he teaches religion, philosophy, and ethics. He has published [Visions of Religion](#) and [William James on Democratic Individuality](#).

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