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Turning Reality Inside Out

In I.3.6, Plotinus states that "moral philosophy derives from dialectic on its contemplative side, but adds the virtuous dispositions and the *exercises* that produce them" and that one cannot be "wise and a dialectician" without the lower virtues, which "apply reasoning to particular experiences and actions". In this paper, I shall be considering the philosophical and ethical implications of a particular set of *exercises* that Plotinus proposes we should follow, which involve metaphorical images deriving from geometry or mathematics. The focus of my discussion is provided by two related images, one elaborated in IV.3.17 and the other in V.8.9 (which is explicitly intended, on Plotinus' guidance, to be practiced).

Both images offer a metaphorical presentation of the universe in terms of circles and spheres that proceed from a centre, but while the first presents the 'fall of the soul' as the unfolding of reality from an external point of view (from the One/centre, to the Intellect, to the Soul and the body for which it cares), the second image presents the 'ascent' of the soul from the internal perspective of each individual soul, turning, as it were, reality inside out. However, how could the practice of the second image, which involves caring for bodily life (to the extent that the internal perspective is inevitably shaped by the particular life and choices of each individual), lead us to the ascent, if it is precisely this care that led us to our fall? Does this set of images display a contradiction or an irreconcilable tension in Plotinus' philosophy?

My suggestion is that if in Plotinus' view, geometry and mathematics, like other 'arts' including music and astronomy, are "double" in that they relate to sense-perception and particular instances, as well as to non-physical, purely intellectual activities (VI.3.16), then the practice of metaphors such as the ones discussed above, has precisely this double aim. That is, it is intended as a philosophical practice which will enable us to both abstract from the contradictory and fragmented appearance of the world and, at the same time, to concentrate on those features of the world that seem to harmonise or to coordinate more than others. I argue that this bifocal vision of reality indicates, rather than a tension in Plotinus' philosophy or ethics, his interest in advancing a philosophy which shall take into account the individual subjects that it concerns, who in the Plotinian vocabulary are "amphibious creatures"(IV.8.4). This practice is central to Plotinus' understanding of philosophy as a way of life rather than an abstract inquiry that could be conducted independently of the experience and point of view of the individual subject.