

## **The Circle and its Center: Metaphysical and Metaphorical Language in Plotinus' *On the Presence of Being Everywhere* (VI. 4-5)**

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In *On the Presence of Being, One and the Same, Everywhere As a Whole* (VI. 4-5), Plotinus addresses a topic that is central to both metaphysics and theology: the presence of soul in body. Not only does he seek to provide a scholarly refutation of the emanationist theories associated with some Gnostic schools, which emphasize the distance between human souls and their ultimate source, but he also hopes to examine the shared human *experience* of existing as embodied soul. These two goals are thoroughly intertwined for Plotinus, and together they give shape to two of the most striking treatises of the *Enneads*.

At some key points in the text, Plotinus employs circle imagery, using the idea of radii extending from the center to the circumference of the figure in all directions to illustrate the relationship between hypostatic Soul and individual ensouled beings. Taken at face value, such metaphors might seem to actually support emanationism, given that points on a circle are, by definition, located a certain distance away from its center. The figure of the circle, however, is not meant to serve as a straightforward representation of a theological or ontological truth. Rather, it belongs to what could be called the Plotinian lexicon, a type of discourse which challenges both traditional philosophical and metaphorical linguistic forms in the same way that Plotinus' emphasis on mystical, contemplative practice challenges traditional notions of the nature of philosophical texts. Understanding the purpose of the circle image, as well as Plotinus' unlikely goal of combining philosophical analysis with an exhortation to engage in contemplative practice, thus necessitates an investigation of the imagery and discourse of *On the Presence of Being Everywhere*. There is a precedent for such discourse, however, in the cosmogony of Plato's *Timaeus*.

The cosmological story told in the *Timaeus* provides Plotinus with both an important instance of the use of the circle as a tool for illustrating metaphysical notions and, more

significantly, an example of a type of language that lies between that of traditional philosophical and scientific argumentation and the storytelling involved in practices such as the recounting of myths. As is well known, the account of the Demiurge's creation of the soul and body of the universe is replete with circle imagery: the body of the world is formed into a sphere – considered by Plato to be the most perfect figure – whereas its soul is composed of two circular bands. The textual status of the cosmogony, however, is at least as striking as the imagery used within it. Timaeus claims that his tale is only “likely and analogous to” the truth (29c), a probable account that should be accepted, but which will never be conclusively proven to be accurate. Thus we are faced with an explanation that is neither purely mythological nor thoroughly “scientific” in our contemporary sense of the word; it claims neither to report empirically verifiable facts nor to entertain or educate with a myth, but to give a probable account of events which human language and thought cannot fully comprehend. Within the dialogue, this type of account has been prepared for by the unfinished Atlantis narrative given by Critias in the opening pages of the text. Even Critias' explanation of the story's convoluted line of transmission blurs the distinction between linear, recordable history, and the timeless space inhabited by myth.

Plotinus, well aware of the form and content of the *Timaeus*, builds on Plato's linguistic model in his discussion of the presence of soul in body. As described above, Plotinus, like Plato, wants to give an account that incorporates seemingly disparate types of inquiry. Much as Plato sought to blend scientific and mythological forms of narrative in order to explain the creation of the universe, Plotinus strives both to explicate soul's nature discursively and to encourage his readers to engage in the contemplative practice which would allow them to understand their personal experience of soul. Keeping the Platonic precedent in mind, then, we will be able to gain greater insight into the nature of Plotinus' circle imagery in *On the Presence of Being Everywhere*. A careful analysis of this imagery, along with passages in the treatise where Plotinus alludes to the importance of mystical experience for the understanding of

metaphysics and ontology, will illustrate the methodological and linguistic parallels between the Plotinian text and the *Timaeus*. In each case, the author blurs the boundaries between genres and disciplines, in order to create a work that expands the scope of philosophical discourse. In addition, both Plotinus and Plato employ a new kind of language, one which enables them to respond to old philosophical problems in a strikingly new way.