

The Wheel of Moral Struggle as a Teaching Tool for Monks and Laity

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The diagram on folio three of the *Speculum theologiae* in Beinecke MS 416 is comprised of forty-three identical spokes around a wheel and a forty-fourth spoke with a cross attached. The spokes are paired into twenty-one sets of contrasting terms, with the last, unpaired spoke representing death. It is likely that the Wheel of Moral Struggle served a broader purpose than the rest of the diagrams in the manuscript. Judging from its lack of numerology, its earthy language, its design, and its content, the Wheel was intended not just for the edification of monks, but for the instruction of laypeople as well.

The diagram lacks the theological and numerological symbols that are hallmarks of the other diagrams in the *Speculum*. Forty-four is not a number of particular symbolic significance or a multiplication product of numbers that are. Forty-two, however, the number of virtues and vices, is six times seven, both of which are significant in medieval numerological thought. Six can represent a balanced ideal, the product of the masculine and feminine essences, and this idea of balance is reinforced by the circular shape of the diagram. Seven can sometimes signify the Apocalypse, a theme perhaps strengthened by the way that the wheel ends abruptly in death, a reminder of the ways in which the viewer should be prepared for the end of life. These are not particularly compelling displays of numerology, however, especially considering the overtness of number symbolism in the manuscript's other diagrams.

The images in MS 416 and other manuscripts like it were intended, in most cases, to serve as mnemonic devices that allowed monks to put images to the words of their faith and create space for deeper and more meaningful meditation. The Wheel of Moral Struggle,

however, does not have any features to recommend it as a true memory aid. Other than the pairing of opposites, the arrangement of items around the circle is largely random. Other diagrams in the manuscript tend to have both virtues and vices grouped together by category, with tree branches and headings that make their arrangement and relationship to one another visually appealing and easy to remember. The Wheel breaks with the mnemonic logic that appears to govern the arrangement of other figures in the collection.

Any diagram intended as a memory tool would have organized the virtues and vices systematically, as do all of the other diagrams in the *Speculum theologiae*. In the Wheel the cardinal virtues of faith, hope, and charity are present, but they occupy no special place. Temperance, one of the remaining seven virtues, is mentioned in the diagram only tangentially, in the virtues exhibited by the abstinent and the sober. The other three virtues mentioned in other parts of the manuscript (justice, prudence, and fortitude) do not show up in the Wheel at all. This omission of the theological virtues is mirrored in the vices. Lust, gluttony, anger, avarice, and pride are all included in the Wheel, but neither sloth nor envy is found here.

Arbitrary arrangement is itself a form of symbolism, suggesting that, except for the struggle between vice and virtue, life is unpredictable. Moreover, the Wheel's abrupt ending in death is a warning against persisting in the ways of evil. The same arbitrary nature that lends the Wheel its didactic power, however, also makes it unsuitable as a true mnemonic device. While, in general, it may allow the reader space for meditation on the vagaries of life and sudden death as well as the need for repentance, the diagram's chaotic arrangement makes its specifics difficult to remember.

Other parts of the *Speculum* feature as organizing principles activities only available to monks or other clerics: liberal arts study, the liturgical round, and biblical exegesis. In this diagram, however, moral precepts are laid out in a way that could also appeal to the laity. Most sayings on the spokes of the wheel are first person depictions of individuals embodying a certain virtue or vice. Many of these brief portraits are drawn from the world outside monastic confines. Some entries, such as that for the property owner, would seem to have no relevance at all to those in the cloister.

One of the other notable features of the Wheel of Moral Struggle is that, despite its positing of moral opposites, it avoids dialectical resolution of the tension between the poles. Dialectic was one of the most popular and prestigious arts at the medieval university. In academic disputations the goal was to resolve the tension between two opposing statements by positing an appropriate synthesis. In this wheel, however, there can be no synthesis between the thesis and antithesis, because compromise between virtue and vice is impossible. This avoidance of academic subtlety suggests yet again that the diagram might have doubled as a teaching tool for the uneducated laity.

The Wheel is clearly meant to be read in a counter-clockwise direction beginning to the immediate left of the “spinner.” After the twenty-one pairs of virtues and vices is death, the final spoke on the wheel, which states simply, “I neither applaud nor spare anyone, but put a seal on all things.” The Wheel, then, is abruptly final, ending quite suddenly at the end of the human life. There is, though, little sense of progress as one follows along with the text. In this sense, the Wheel of Moral Struggle is not dissimilar to the Middle Ages’ most famous wheel, that of Fortune. Inspired by the second book of Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*, the Wheel of

Fortune nearly always depicted the goddess Fortuna spinning a wheel, while humanity rode the wheel in good times and fell off it in bad. However, there are significant differences between the two wheels. The spinning of the Wheel of Moral Struggle does not imply the progression through the stages of life as does the movement of the Wheel of Fortune. The most important difference, however, is that the Wheel of Fortune suggests that the viewer has almost no control over his destiny. Fortune, “empress of the world,” is in charge. By contrast, the Wheel of Moral Struggle offers some hope to its student. Humans determine where they stand on this wheel; they have a choice between good and evil.

The Wheel of Moral Struggle is more pragmatic and less mystical than the other diagrams of the *Speculum theologiae*. It offers a clear moral challenge to its student, whom it assumes to be at once lacking in philosophical subtlety and wise to the ways of the world. Thus, it seems to be not only a tool for training monks. It also would have been useful for instructing the laity about the wages of sin and the necessity of reform before the hand of death “puts a seal on all things.”