

**“What goes up must come down”:
Image schemas and viewpoint in the image of Fortune’s wheel**

Adriana Byrne
University of British Columbia

In the 6th century text *The Consolation of Philosophy* by the late Roman author Boethius, the personified figure of Fortune says “rise up on my wheel if you like, but don’t count it an injury when by the same token you begin to fall” (2p2.24-5). This text introduced the conceptualization of an individual’s life as a moving viewpoint, located on the rim of a vertically-oriented wheel so that it moves up and down as the wheel turns. It had a huge influence on the philosophical conception of humans’ place in the universe throughout the following centuries. The image of a turning wheel or circle has been used to represent the image schema of a CYCLE in a variety of different cultures (cf. the dharma wheel, yin and yang). What makes Fortune’s wheel unique is the innovation of placing participants on the wheel’s edge, so that their viewpoints can make new kinds of simulations possible. This addition is the source of complex meanings. As this paper argues, the richness emerges out of the interaction between a schema and multiple viewpoints.

Gibbs defines image schemas as “the embodied simulation of events” (2005:115). Their intimate connection to embodied experience makes them inherently viewpointed, since, as Sweetser points out, “we never have experience of the world except as a viewpoint-equipped, embodied self among other viewpoint-equipped embodied selves.” (2012:1). In early cultures, a turning wheel is a common metaphor for change; this could be considered a neutrally-viewpointed use of the CYCLE schema, where the wheel’s motion has an outside observer. In Roman visual art and literature, for comparison, the goddess Fortuna is often represented as standing on top of her wheel, which adds Fortune’s viewpoint, construed as the schema of BALANCE because she is on an unstable foundation.

The immensely influential Boethian interpretation adds a participant attached to the wheel and turning with it, which profiles another viewpoint, rich with the metaphorical possibilities of the UP/DOWN image schema. Adding multiple viewpoints opens up further possible meanings for the image. Many such possibilities emerge from the medieval image of four people located at different points on Fortune’s wheel, which shows one man rising up while another one falls down, and one clinging onto the bottom while his opposite sits in a throne at the top. Mentally setting the wheel in motion and activating the BALANCE schema by imagining an axis joining the participants on opposite sides yields a basic inference that in order for one person to move upwards, another one has to move downwards. This is yet another new meaning created by the interaction of image schemas, motion, and participants’ viewpoints.

This paper will examine various stages in the history of visual and verbal depictions of Fortune’s wheel. It will demonstrate the ways in which a schema that incorporates multiple viewpoints can yield changing construals of human fate.

References

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