

The one and the many

Description

Plato (c. 428-427 BCE) promoted the idea of a unity, a world of perfect being, somewhere beyond our grasp, but to which we aspire, and of which we bear a kind of primordial memory. The imperfect, sensible world we happen to inhabit now is of multiplicity and variation, a world of flux and becoming.^[1] But there are other traditions for whom the supposed higher realm is the site of radical flux and indeterminacy. This reality is the place of a tension between the one and the many that is beyond logic.

Prior to Plato, the pre-Socratics had already developed narratives around the theme of unity and plurality. For **Heraclitus** (c.535-c.475 BCE), unity and plurality reside in each other:

“Things taken together are whole and not whole, something which is being brought together and brought apart, which is in tune and out of tune; out of all things there comes a unity, and out of a unity all things.”^[2]

That something should be the case and not be the case (whole and not whole) at the same time caused **Aristotle** (384 BC – 322 BC) some disquiet, and in *Metaphysics* he develops principles of logic, including the law of the excluded middle, to challenge the pre-Socratics.^[3]

Thinking about this reality as an ineffable, antagonistic, and paradoxical play between unity and multiplicity appears in many traditions, as outlined by **Mircea Eliade** (1907-1986) in the case of rituals and legends. He notes that certain rites and beliefs have the aim of reminding human kind that

“the ultimate reality, the sacred, the divine, defy all possibilities of rational comprehension.”^[4]

They remind us that such realities

“can only be grasped as a mystery or a paradox, that the divine conception cannot be conceived as a sum of qualities and virtues but as an absolute freedom, beyond Good and Evil.”^[5]

Gershom Scholem (1897-1982) offers a similar characterization of the writings of the Kabbalah, the Medieval Jewish tradition that was sometimes at odds with philosophical teaching. The Kabbalah highlighted aspects of God that were “beyond rationality” and which become paradoxical the moment they are put into words.^[6] The early German thinker, **Meister Eckhart** (1260-1329), adds weight to the agonistic relationship between unity and multiplicity in asserting that unity in multiplicity is never found anywhere, but is understood: so

“only in God are being and understanding identical.”^[7]

The agonistic version of the unity myth appears in phenomena pertaining to the androgyne: ritual role reversals by men and women, and paying obeisance to beings who are both male and female. As outlined by **Mikhail Bakhtin** (1895-1975) and Eliade, the symbolic reversal of roles, the suspension of laws and customs under the pretext of carnival pranks, and orgiastic rituals seek a reintegration of opposites, a regression to the primordial and homogeneous,^[8] but such activities are also

a symbolic restoration of Chaos, of the undifferentiated unity that preceded the Creation.^[9]

Similarly, for the Pythagoreans, according to Aristotle, the number one is both even (which is limited) and odd (which is unlimited). So Unity consists of both the limited and the unlimited, the one and the many. For the Pythagoreans the whole sensible universe is made up of numbers, so it is imbued with this conflict between unity and multiplicity.^[10]

The real, as the site of play between unity and multiplicity, as a place of paradox, finds expression in **Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's** (1770-1831) concept of the dialectic between being and nothing. It is a theme to which many recent thinkers have returned, from **Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844-1900) onwards. It also finds expression in the tradition of verbal nonsense (*Alice Through the Looking Glass*), to which surrealism was a party in the twentieth century.

According to drama theorist Martin Esslin, **verbal paradox** is a metaphysical endeavor, a striving to enlarge and to transcend the limits of the material universe and its logic.^[11] Nonsense is not merely a foil to reason, but a further attempt to achieve unity with the universe by the destruction of language, which keeps us apart from the world by establishing the independence of objects. In exercising

the destruction of language through nonsense,^[12]

Lewis Carroll (1832-1898) played with the arbitrary naming of things, a process which, according to Esslin, expresses the mystical yearning for unity with the universe.^[13] Esslin illustrates this conflict in his interpretation of Alice's journey through the woods where things have no name. There she encounters a fawn, and Alice and the faun walk together through the woods until the normally timid animal realizes it is a fawn, and that Alice is a human child, and bounds away.^[14] For Esslin, the naming function of language therefore denies access to a harmonious unity, symbolized by the broken embrace of a human and a wild animal. Verbal nonsense restores this unity.

The theme is also taken up in certain provocative narratives of the cyborg, presenting the cyberspace phenomenon as dealing in the ineffable and contradictory.

- Excerpted and updated from Coyne, Richard. 1999. *Technoromanticism: Digital Narrative, Holism, and the Romance of the Real*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, pp.51-53.

[1] Concepts such as time are merely an image, or a derivative, of an *eternal* unity. According to Plato, when the Living Being ordered the heavens he made in that which we call time an eternal moving image of the eternity which remains forever at one. (Plato, *Timaeus* and *Critias*, 51.) See A. Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity*, 72-73 for a summary of issues of time and eternity.

- [2] Heraclitus, Fr. 10, in R. E. Allen, *Greek Philosophy: Thales to Aristotle*, 41.
- [3] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, in R. E. Allen, *Greek Philosophy: Thales to Aristotle*, 330. Skepticism towards myths of the paradox of unity continues to this day. Stokes sees the issue as a lack of subtlety in the Presocratics' use of language. When Heraclitus says that day and night are 'one', we are entitled to ask 'one what?' A similar response is appropriate to the more abstract 'unity'. M. Stokes, *One and Many in Presocratic Philosophy*, 10.
- [4] M. Eliade, *The Two and the One*, 82.
- [5] M. Eliade, *The Two and the One*, 82.
- [6] G. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 225.
- [7] Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: Selected Treatises and Sermons*, 182.
- [8] M. Eliade, *The Two and the One*, 114.
- [9] M. Eliade, *The Two and the One*, 114. The creation of the world came about as a breach in the primal unity, as in the separation of light from darkness. According to Indian mythology, in our natural state we are made up of pairs of opposites, but in order to attain metaphysical knowledge we must transcend these opposites through ritual sacrifice and other rites of integration. M. Eliade, *The Two and the One*, 95. Eliade recounts many instances of the unity theme in various myths, in M. Eliade, *The Two and the One*, as does Jung, in C. G. Jung, *Four Archetypes: Mother, Rebirth, Spirit, Trickster*.
- [10] Hegel also devotes a number of pages to 'the unity of the One and the Many'. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Science of Logic*, 172.
- [11] M. Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 245.
- [12] M. Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 248.
- [13] M. Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 248.
- [14] L. Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*, 230-232.

Bibliography

- Allen, Reginald E. 1985. *Greek Philosophy: Thales to Aristotle*. New York: Free Press.
- Eliade, Mercea. 1965. *The Two and the One*. Trans. J. M. Cohen. London: Harvill Press.
- Esslin, Martin. 1961. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. London: Eyre and Spottiswood.
- Scholem, Gershom G. 1955. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Snodgrass, Adrian B. 1990. *Architecture, Time and Eternity: Studies in the Stellar and Temporal Symbolism of Traditional Buildings, Volume 2*. New Delhi, India: Aditya Prakashan.

Date Created

March 9, 2012

Author

rcoyne99