

THE TEMENOS ACADEMY

"The One"

Author: John Michell

Source: Temenos Academy Review 17 (2014)

pp. 17-19

Published by The Temenos Academy

Copyright © The Estate of John Michell, 2014

The Temenos Academy is a Registered Charity
in the United Kingdom

www.temenosacademy.org

The One*

JOHN MICHELL

The concept of the One or the Whole belongs to every religious or philosophical tradition and is the basis of them all. Plato in *Timaeus* calls it ἐν ὅλον ὅλων (the one Whole of wholes) and identifies it with the cosmos or universal organism, the unique, total product of its Creator. His image of it is a perfect sphere, the geometrical figure which contains all others and is the most symmetrical, because its centre is equidistant from every point on its surface. The sphere is the most efficient container, enfolding the greatest possible amount of space in relation to its surface area.

Outside the cosmos there is, in our terms, nothing, because space and time are confined within it. The Creator or First Cause can not be limited by any attributes, so can not properly be called the One. Nor can the term be applied to anything within the cosmos, for nothing in our world is complete or independent. All phenomena, physical, spiritual and mental, are components in the universal system and constantly change in relation to everything else. They belong, said Plato, to the world of 'becoming' and not to the world of actual 'being'. In the common perception of mystics, they are illusions. The only constant reality is the universal creature which manifests them.

The all-inclusive sphere is the geometer's image of the One, but it is merely an image, and the One can be described or imagined in many other forms. In myths, scriptures and poetry it is seen as an ideal kingdom, a paradisaical garden, a perfect city, similar to those we know on earth but on a higher plane of experience. It is many-coloured, sparkling, fragrant, bringing joy and peace to the soul. It is the place of our childhood dreams, the real place, where we really belong. Above all, it is complete. Like the primordial Garden of Eden, it contains all creatures, all living according to their natures and all in harmony. It is

* This essay was contributed to a project, initially proposed by the late Ramchandra Gandhi, to compile an anthology of writings on the sacred words of the world's spiritual traditions. The project never reached completion, but it is planned to publish some of the individual pieces in *TAR*. The first in the series, by H. H. the Dalai Lama, appeared in *TAR* 16.

an image of the perfect order above the apparent chaos of mundane existence.

Also expressing the One are abstract ideals such as Beauty, Truth, Justice, Completeness, Perfection, for these are indivisible wholes, not subject to change or depletion. However much or little we draw upon them, they remain the same. They are types of the One, the reality to which everyone and everything aspires. From this we discover another symbol of the One, the philosophical Gold of the alchemists.

The two opposite tendencies in nature are reconciled within the One, which gives rise to their ceaseless interactions yet remains ever tranquil and the same. We should all like to be the One, calmly in control of our existence, and so we try to imitate it. Our thoughts, lives, decisions and productions all reflect the One, being attempts at reconciling the two opposites in every situation . . . on the one hand, on the other.

The most formal expression of the One is a cosmology. This word is now often used in its modern, limited sense, meaning astronomical speculations. Properly, it implies a total description of existential reality, including patterns of the human mind. Such a thing is not literally possible, but certain expressions, certain arrangements of myth, music, symbols, figures, numerical formulae, state constitutions, communities, households and minds are better than others. And the reason why they are better is that they approach most closely to the One and to its archetypal associates, Beauty, Truth, Harmony and so on. In the ancient world every nation had its cosmology, with the various types of myth, music and ritual derived from it; yet each was an expression of the same original, the cosmic archetype of the One. The twelve gods or signs of the zodiac formed an image of completeness, reflected in the twelve episodes in Arthurian and other state myths, in the twelve-note scale of sacred chant and the twelve-tribe constitutions of traditional statecraft. Beyond these local systems, each in its way an expression of Wholeness, philosophers saw twelve races of mankind, each contributing its characteristic note to celebrating the universal One.

The Pythagorean philosophers held that One was not really a number but a symbol. They adopted the traditional creation myth, that the creative thought behind the universe is a simple numerical code, which is also a musical harmony. Its basic component, by which we are enabled to investigate it, seems to be the unit, the one. Yet this

is an illusion, arising from the necessary structuring of our minds, for ultimately the entire field of number, like the universe that reflects it, is a complete entity, a unique One, indivisible and with no wholly independent parts.

Nations, religions, individuals and scientific theories may claim to represent Truth and therefore the One, but they are all doomed by incompleteness, and time exposes their pretensions. The only real One is divine Creation, perfect, unchanging, humanity's natural standard. It is, said Plato, the 'heavenly pattern' which we can observe, study and establish within ourselves.

