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Abstract: Focuses on the qualitative meaning of number. Familiarity with the quantitative aspects of number; Early *Pythagoreans* as not distinguishing between the practical and spiritual meaning of mathematics; Number symbolism's link to the sacred; Symbols which served both as numerals and letters in the Hebrew, Greek, Arabic and early Sanskrit alphabets; Creative capacity of number to stimulate the human spirit.

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Best Part

SACRED QUALITIES

As symbols, numbers are unique in that they embody two distinct kinds of meaning. One is quantitative; the other is qualitative. Both meanings give number power, but different kinds of power.

Today we are most familiar and most comfortable with the quantitative meaning, for that is the way today's culture initially teaches us to appreciate numbers. Early on we learn to count, and that simple accomplishment opens up a conceptual world that we share with other creatures only on the most rudimentary of levels. By the time we complete elementary school we can add, subtract, multiply, divide, and otherwise put numbers to work for us. We continue thereafter to use the power derived from the quantitative nature of numbers to help us with the practical aspects of our lives. We shop, cook, conduct business, keep track of time, take appropriate amounts of medicine, drive cars, fly airplanes, map out (and pay for) vacations, plant crops, and check our e-mail all because the quantitative power of number assists us. What's more, we pretty much take this power for granted. Sometimes we even complain about it. Ask a struggling college student, for instance, whether she's taking "statistics" or "sadicistics" and see what answer you get.

The qualitative meaning of number is less familiar to us, although, with a little help, most people will recognize it. The easiest place to find it today is in a bookstore, in the section dealing with numerology. There, we learn that some specific number represents our individual soul urge, our life path, our peaks of achievement, the challenges each of us face in life, etc. By associating a number with each letter of our birth name, and with a little practice (just buy the book), we can then determine the appropriate numbers necessary to reveal these associated personal characteristics.

Judging purely by the popularity of such books, it is clear that many people today appreciate the qualitative power of numbers, albeit in a form which just as many people seem to dismiss as superstitious nonsense. My own view toward alphabetic numerology (gematria) tends to be agnostic. Calculating my soul urge (nine), for example, was kind of fun, sort of like checking a horoscope or finding my Myers-Brigg inclinations. The resulting "nine" supposedly suggests my soul-goal is to learn to serve humanity. That it also implies I tend toward self-centeredness with a persistent need for ego-inflation bothers me not at all. What troubles me is the fact that this assessment rings uncomfortably true! It's that latter part that we refer to as the qualitative power of number.

Earlier societies tended to readily accept and appreciate this qualitative meaning of number. The ancient *Pythagoreans*, for example, did not distinguish between the practical and spiritual meaning of mathematics: everything was number. They believed that the universe literally sings and that numbers help us understand the harmony. According to this thought, the motion of the

planets produces harmonious tones based on particular numerical frequencies. Number exists prior to physical reality, and indeed number in some way gives birth to, or manifests, that reality. This is a lot of power to ascribe to number, but the ancient Greeks were by no means alone in holding such views.

Philolaus, writing about 450 B.C.E., captured the heart of Pythagorean number philosophy when he wrote that "All things have a number, and it is this fact which enables them to be known." To the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, who lived about the time of Jesus, number was the "basis of the design of the Creator" and "the number itself, rather than its concrete representation, is considered the ultimate reality." The Roman philosopher Plotinus, writing in the third century C.E., believed that "Number exists before objects which are described by number. The variety of sense-objects merely recalls to the soul the notion of number." Augustine, one of the great shapers of Christian doctrine, "saw in number an image of the absolute" which led him, by investigation of number symbolism, to "discover the mysteries of God which are set down in Scripture." [1]

Number symbolism, also known variously as number mysticism, numerology, and the science of numbers, has a clear historical link to the sacred. Often this connection has appeared in processes of divination, in astrological analysis, or in other rituals which contemporary society generally attributes to superstitious faith in magic. Yet residual traces of number magic remain with us today in surprising contexts. As a young teenager, for instance, I would often pluck the petals of a daisy trying to decide if "he loves me" or "he loves me not." This practice was but a remnant of an old English children's rhyme, divinatory in essence:

One I love, two I love,
Three I love, I say,
Four I love with all my heart,
Five I cast away;
Six he loves, seven she loves, eight both love.
Nine he comes, ten he tarries,
Eleven he courts, twelve he marries.

American folklore extended the rhyme three more numbers:

Thirteen they quarrel, fourteen, they part,
Fifteen, they die of a broken heart.

At the heart of such endeavor has always resided the assumption that certain numbers stand for something more than the concept of a concrete aggregate. In this sense, numbers are used symbolically to represent something significant to the sacred life of humankind. Four, for instance, is universally the number of earth and earth-things. Among many primitive peoples there were not only four directions, but also four winds, and, occasionally, a four-eyed, four-eared God which supervises earthly creation. The ancient Egyptians depicted a cosmos with a heavenly roof supported by four pillars, mountains, or women at the cardinal points. In Pythagorean cosmography, the first solid produced is four, and the fourth solid is assigned to the earth, a fact which added philosophical support to the commonly held belief in the four-squareness of earth.

The Hebrew, Greek, Arabic, and early Sanskrit alphabets all employed symbols which served both as numerals and as letters. For instance, the Hebrew word for Adam doubles as a symbol for four. Using a kind of numerical logic foreign to most of us today, Augustine noted that man is a tetrad (man is four) since the name Adam is composed of the letters which are the four winds. Thus he reasoned that "knowledge of divine things is disseminated throughout the world by the four gospels, evangelists or beasts [and is] emblemized by the four extremities of the cross, the four-fold division of Christ's clothing, and the four virtues, or forms of love." [2]

The significant point in these illustrations is that a number, in this case the number "4," stood for (represented or symbolized) something else. It was what we call a metaphor, holding qualitative rather than quantitative meaning, and as such it evoked in the human mind important understanding of the relationship between the human and the divine. It is difficult for our modern minds to fully appreciate the intensity with which earlier cultures embraced this relationship between numbers and their symbolic meanings. As scholar Vincent Foster Hopper put it, numbers were not mere mathematical tools, nor were they simply like counters in a game. Rather, they were "as

fundamental realities, alive with memories and eloquent with meaning." [3] Such passion for the symbolic aspect of numbers created in our earlier societies a kind of dual use of numbers, one decidedly computational, and the other intricately linked to divine revelation. Until recent times, this duality was seen not as a split, but as mutually reinforcing guides to philosophical and spiritual wisdom.

In the last few centuries, we have tended to forget the second of these functions, focusing almost exclusively on the more formal aspects of mathematics as a symbolic language useful for all sorts of accurate, "truthful" computation. This one-sidedness, I believe, is changing. Work by scholars such as Sal Restivo and Reuben Hersh has done much to suggest a middle ground by showing that the content of mathematics has a strong social or cultural element to it, and is therefore not nearly as absolute as recent tradition would suggest. Indeed, Fritj of Capra goes to the other extreme of one-sidedness when he writes in *The Web of Life* that "The new mathematic ... is one of relationships and patterns. It is qualitative rather than quantitative and thus embodies the shift of emphasis that is characteristic of systems thinking--from objects to relationships, from quantity to quality, from substance to pattern." [4]

To me, as to the ancient *Pythagoreans*, the power of mathematics is that it easily assumes both the quantitative and qualitative roles, sort of like the wave/particle characteristic of modern physics. We are most familiar with the quantitative characteristic in the form of countable data, testable statistics, measurable science. The qualitative role, which tends to show up primarily as mathematical metaphor, leaves those of us suckled on variations of the formalistic logic of Bertrand Russell feeling much less secure. This uneasiness is aggravated by contemporary questions emerging from the realm of "numbers" which challenge traditional religious views. Or maybe they support them. That's the problem. We're not quite sure.

Is god a sophisticated computer expert and we (as a Far Side cartoon suggests) mere figures on his screen, subject to deletion with one stroke of the "smite" button on his keyboard?

Is our world, as several prominent theorists maintain, based on the mathematics of holography, where each minuscule part holds within it the makings of the entire whole? Is universal consciousness simply a matter of quantum mind or the intersection of certain algebraic group theories? Is, as economist Brian Arthur contends, the Newtonian clockwork metaphor akin to standard Protestantism, while the emerging complexity of mathematical chaos theory is totally Taoist? Does "organized complexity" give rise to the "openness of the universe," and hence permit the existence of human beings with free will, as mathematician Paul Davies says? Is, as physicist Frank Tipler claims in *The Physics of Immortality*, the human soul nothing more than a specific program being run on a computing machine called the brain? Are DNA and RNA natural robots, as some cognitive scientists believe? Is life simply a computation? Is real life just one more Window?

The number symbolism in these and similar "holy mathaphors" (mathematical metaphors) emerging in modern society is more complex than its counterpart in the numerology section of the local bookstore. In these more sophisticated and often highly advanced mathematical renderings, the power of number is no longer confined to mere integers. Perhaps, however, this evolution is merely indicative of the creative capacity of number to engage, to motivate, to stimulate the human spirit. As mathematical historian E. T. Bell wrote in the earlier part of this century:

Any numerological theory of the universe seems queer to a mathematical skeptic only when he persists in staring at the modern aspect of Pythagorean dogma. Transpose the abstruse metaphors of modern mathematical physics into those of the older mysticism, and the illusion of queerness vanishes. Spectacular novelties take on the familiar form immortalized by Pythagoras when he turned numerologist. Number is at the bottom of everything; the *Pythagoreans* in the sixth century B.C. said that number is everything and that everything is number. They meant that is in the fullest sense. More than one modern classic of high physical speculation says exactly the same thing, and numerology says Amen. [5]

In the past, numbers, the fundamental symbols of mathematics, have served humankind as apertures--openings to new realities, new wisdom. Today this power remains intact, as numbers ever challenge us to better understand our world, and our mundane and sacred relationships to it. Some of the material in this essay originally appeared in *What Number Is God?: Metaphors,*

Metaphysics, Metamathematics and the Nature of Things (SUNY, 1995) by Sarah Voss. Much of it also is taken from Math: A New Language of Theology, a text in progress and the title of her academic course in science and religion.

NOTES

1. See Sarah Voss, What Number Is God? Metaphors, Metaphysics, Metamathematics and the Nature of Things (New York: SUNY Press, 1995), p. 76.
2. Vincent Foster Hopper, Medieval Number Symbolism: Its Sources, Meaning, and Influence on Thought and Expression (Norwood, Pa.: Norwood Editions, 1977), p. 84.
3. Ibid., vii.
4. Fritjof Capra, The Web of Life (New York: Doubleday, 1996), p. 113.
5. E. T. Bell, Numerology, Vol. 3. (Westport, Conn.: Hyperion Press, 1933), p. 61.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): The Egyptian Zodiac of Denderah, seen on the ceiling of the Temple of Hathor

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): The four Greek elements of the geocentric universe

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By Sarah Voss

Sarah Voss is a Unitarian Universalist minister, author, and lecturer. Her most recent book, Zero: Reflections about Nothing (Cross Cultural Publications), is the first in a series of four volumes of inspirational essays and stories, to include also One, Two, and Many.

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