

Pythagorean Number Mysticism — article by Rob Lund

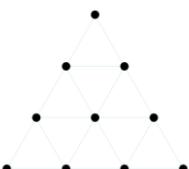
A part of the First Degree ritual refers to the Pythagorean System. One aspect of this system deals with the mystical aspect of numbers and their meaning. Number Mysticism exists in many of the ancient mysteries—in different forms, and with many similarities.

It is likely that Pythagoras learned this system from the Egyptians, among whom he studied for many years, and was initiated into their ancient mysteries. He does seem to have modified this system slightly, as the Egyptian system incorporated the numerical basis into many of their myths. This excision was probably due to cultural issues and is unimportant to us at present.

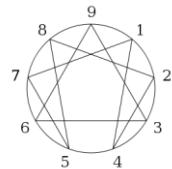
This system is the underlying philosophy behind all the Egyptian arts and sciences. It is interesting to note that modern language probably does not have the capability of explaining the incorporation of philosophy, mathematics, architecture, music, mysticism and theology in the Egyptian system ¹. To the ancient Egyptian philosophers, however, it was their way of life. "Number is All" declared the Pythagoreans.

The classification of numbers as limited/unlimited; male/female; good/bad, etc., or to call five the number of love, may seem strange at first, until we consider the thinking that led to these attributes. In this modern world, logic and reason drive everything. And yet, our senses provide information that is not always related to reason—that there are realms to which reason has no access, and this includes the paths of initiatic traditions.

Let us now turn to the numbers—we shall deal with the nine numbers in the Ennead, represented symbolically by the Tetractys and by the Enneagram.



[Tetractys]



[Enneagram]

Note that the numbers do not refer to amounts, but rather indicate functions and principles upon which the universe is created and maintained.

1

One, the absolute, the unity, also called the Primordial Scission. It is incomprehensible and unfathomable to human faculties.

One, the unity, created multiplicity out of itself. Unpolarized energy, in becoming conscious of itself, creates polarized energy.

One is represented in our Lodges by the GAOTU and the point in the circle.

2

One becomes two. Two is not one plus one since, metaphysically, there is only one One, which is all. Two expresses polarization, and fundamental opposition. Polarity is fundamental to all phenomena, without exception. It represents the duality in all things: negative, positive; active, passive; male, female; etc. Duality is primordial tension, eternally unreconciled opposites. Energy is the measurable expression of spirit's revolt against its imprisonment in matter.

Two is represented in our Lodges by the chequered pavement.

3

The establishment of a relationship between two opposing forces becomes a third force. One, in becoming Two, becomes Three simultaneously. It is the 'becoming' that is the third force, providing the innate, and mysterious, reconciling principle.

A male and female is not a relationship—there has to be love or desire to create a relationship. Hydrogen and Chlorine are not enough, in themselves, to create a chemical reaction to produce an acid—there has to be an affinity. Logic and reason can not account for, or know, relationship, but can be used to experience it. The 'heart' (or human emotions) can understand Three, and the more one understands, the more one can reconcile seeming incongruities. From common experience, we can recognize and project the metaphysical role of Three, and we can see why trinities are universal to our mythologies. The man who understands Three is not easily seduced into dogmatism.

Three requires much more study in order to understand it, and to make progress in a spiritual way.

Three is represented in our Lodges prolifically. E.g.: the Sun, the Moon, and the Master; three principal officers, three steps, etc., etc.

4

Four is the number of material or substance ('things') - matter. Two is tension, Three is relationship. These are not enough to account for the idea of 'substance'. Using the

previous examples, lover, beloved, and desire is not yet a marriage or even an affair. Hydrogen, Chlorine, and chemical affinity is not yet an acid. A fourth term is required to define the 'thing'. Note that this fourth principle does still not bring the 'thing' into existence, it just defines it. So, matter is a principle above polarity and relationship but includes both but is something beyond the sum of its constituents. It is both a composite and a new unity.

The four terms needed to account for matter are the traditional four elements: air, earth, water, and fire. These are not, as commonly believed, a primitive attempt to define the elements that make up the universe, but a sophisticated means of describing the inherent nature of matter, and in this case, to describe the functional roles of the four terms required for matter. Fire is the active, coagulating principle, Earth is the receptive, formative principle, Air is the subtle, mediating principle, and Water is the composite principle.

Four is the principle of substantiality. Note that this does not yet describe something that we can touch, it just defines it. This is a significant statement, and should be pondered.

Each aspect of primordial, spiritual duality is itself dual. This double reaction is the basis of the material world. This is a difficult concept to grasp, but space does not permit a fuller explanation. Symbols, studied in the correct way, make these processes clearer than words. The square inscribed within a circle represents passive potential matter contained within unity.

In Freemasonry, we have four sides of the Apron, and the four sides of the Lodge.

5

To the Pythagoreans, five was the number of 'love', as it represented the union of the first male number, three, and the first female number, two. It is the number of creation. Five incorporates the principles of polarity and reconciliation, and is the key to understanding the manifested universe, which is polar in nature and treble in principle. From two, three, and five, all Harmonic proportions and relationships can be derived. The interplay of these proportions and relations drives the forms of all matter. You will see five everywhere in nature: most leaves have five points; most flowers have five petals; etc. There is also an influence on music.

Four terms account for the idea of matter, but five, the union of male and female, enables it to "happen". This concept is responsible for the peculiar reverence in which five has been

held by so many cultures. It is why the pentagram and pentagon have been sacred symbols in esoteric organizations.

Looking again at the functional roles of number in everyday life, we may gain a little insight into the manner in which they operate. Roles change and become more complex: man/woman is a polarity, but the same man and woman, linked by "desire" in a relationship, are no longer the same; and when this three-term relationship changes into the tetrad of "affair" or "household", they again change, functionally. The couple now plays both active, masculine, initiating and passive, feminine, receptive roles simultaneously. The sculptor is active towards the block of wood or stone, receptive to inspiration—the block is receptive to the chisel, provoking inspiration.

Five terms are required to account for the principle of creation, and five is, therefore, the number of potentiality. As potentiality exists outside of time, five is therefore the number of eternity, and of the principle of eternal creation.

In the Lodge, you will find a five-pointed star which, in Egypt symbolized eternal life. Five steps, in one of our ceremonies, relates to potentiality (a statement to ponder), and also the five orders of architecture (which also has further meaning).

6

Five terms are required to account for creation, but are insufficient to describe the framework in which the event takes place. That framework is time and space. The numbers one through five can be considered as spiritual, or metaphysical—they cannot be seen (one cannot see a polarity, or affinity, or relationship).

Six defines our physical reality—our senses can discern time and space (volume). To our physical senses, time and space are infinite (when did time begin, where does the universe end?).

To our physical being, time and space are 'real' - we live, we die, we occupy space. Eastern philosophies deem the world of the senses as illusion, a purely mental construct. Western empiricism takes sensory data at face value, despite the problems with this 'philosophy' (how does one measure infinity?).

Initiatic orders teach that, in the spiritual world, time does not exist: to the absolute unity, there is no time. They teach that the goal of man is reunion with the absolute. Therefore, their teachings insist upon the necessity to transcend time, since it holds us in bondage with the material world (hence the disciplines of Yoga, Zen, etc.). The two

different philosophies do not actually conflict and, together, form a more comprehensive understanding.

In Egypt, the cube (six sided) represented the notion of temporal and spatial phenomena, and was used as the base for a pharaoh's throne.

In our Lodges, we have the ashlers to remind us to seek perfection, and the altar. The twenty-four inch gauge is also related (4 x 6) and refers to time and space/extents. The seal of Solomon has six points.

7

Five terms are required for the principle of life, six terms describe the framework in which the event takes place, but this is not sufficient to account for the process of coming into being, of becoming. In the material world, this is experienced in terms of growth.

The analogies of sculptor and statue, used previously, now become purely metaphorical: the statue doesn't grow, except metaphorically. Growth is a universal principle, which is observable and measurable in all realms of the physical world, except the atomic level. We cannot observe or measure growth of an atom. However, everything physical is made up of them. Growth is not a continuous process, but takes place in stages, discrete steps, or quantum jumps - quite often in seven steps or stages. It cannot be accounted for scientifically: there is nothing in the behavior of hydrogen or carbon atoms that makes the growth of a creature predictable.

There are seven tones in the harmonic scale. A string of a certain length, when vibrating, produces a note. Divide it in half and a note one octave higher is produced. In between, are seven intervals, all unequal, which the ear interprets as harmonious. Harmony cannot be rationally defined, but we react to it, or its absence. Notes are derived from the division of one into two (unity into multiplicity). Harmony evokes an instinctive awareness of, and even a longing for, the unity from which it derives.

The seventh sign of the zodiac is Libra, the *balance*. Seven signifies the union of spirit and matter (three and four), represented in our lodges by the apron (triangular flap on square base). As the ritual states: seven are required to make the lodge perfect. The ritual defines seven liberal arts and sciences, to balance the mind. There are seven principle officers in a lodge.

8, 9, and beyond

As may be inferred from the above, each number has its own function, but is also a composite of the numbers that make it up.

Seven is: 4 + 3, matter and spirit; 5 + 2, fundamental opposition united by love; 6+1, the fundamental note actualized in time and space. Eight corresponds to the physical world as we normally experience it.

Beyond Eight, the higher numbers up to 12 represent pattern or plan; account for the necessity, the principle that reconciles order and disorder; and the matrix within which all these functions operate simultaneously. These higher numbers are not part of our direct experience, but we can recognize them, philosophically. They are complex and not easily described in our normal language. In the zodiac, each sign has elements of duality, triplicity and quadruplicity. While space does not permit a discussion of this here, it should be realized that this ancient scheme is in no way founded on the musings of ancient dreamers, but is rigorously constructed according to Pythagorean principles.

The Tetractys and the Grand Ennead (see diagrams above) are symbols of the complexity of the higher numbers—interpenetrating, interacting, interlocked. These are rich, multilayered symbols which provide, in meditation, an almost inexhaustible flow of meanings, relationships, and correspondences, and is an expression of the metaphysical reality.

"If we are to understand the physical world we live in (to say nothing of the spiritual world), we must examine the principles and functions that underlie common experience. The symbolism of number allows us to do this."

This article has only given a very brief insight into Pythagorean Number Mysticism, and does not even begin to convey an understanding of these philosophies.

For further reading on the subject, see the references below.

Serpent in The Sky by John Anthony West

A Study of Numbers by R.A. Schwaller de Lubicz

The Theology of Arithmetic by Iamblichus translated by Robin Waterfield

Notes:

1. Refer to the insightful work of R.A. Schwaller de Lubicz: "The Temple of Man"; "The Temple In Man"; "Symbol and the Symbolic"; and others.

I must warn that these works are very difficult reading. It may be better to first read John Anthony West's "Serpent In The Sky—The High Wisdom of Ancient Egypt", which is a synopsis of Schwaller de Lubicz's work, which provides a good introduction to his thinking.