

The Powers and Properties of Numbers in Rosicrucian Metaphysics

*Being a short paper delivered to the Very Worthy Celebrant and Fratres of
Bishop Wilkins College No. 58*

By

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Very Worthy Celebrant, the short paper I deliver this evening is entitled *The Properties and Powers of Numbers in Rosicrucian Metaphysics* and I present it as an overview of the place of Number in our Philosophy, which I hope will complement the Lecture on the Interpretation of Numerals given to our Zelatores.

It is not my intention to discuss the particular powers or properties of particular numbers but to describe the metaphysical systems through which they derive their importance to us and the ancient fratres of our Order.

Metaphysics is that branch of Philosophy which is concerned with the ultimate reality beyond the appearance of things. From ancient times it has always been considered that there exists in some way, some fundamental reality, some abiding nature which is not fully apprehended by the senses. This Metaphysical reality may be accessible through mystic revelation (whether passive or active) or rational contemplation and I believe these are the two routes through which Number finds its place in Rosicrucian philosophy.

In first of the Rosicrucian Manifestos, the *Fama Fraternitatis*, (1615) the anonymous author declares that:

“Our Philosophy also is not a new Invention, but as Adam after his fall hath received it, and as Moses and Solomon used it: ... It shall not be said, this is true according to Philosophy, but true according to Theologie; And wherein Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras and others did hit the mark, and wherein Enoch, Abraham, Moses, Solomon did excel; but especially wherewith that wonderful book the Bible agreeth.”¹

I shall discuss the Greek philosophers referred to here later but first I should note that this declaration refers to the cabalistic tradition that Adam received the cabala from God or in some versions from the Angel

¹ *Fama Fraternitatis* in *The Fame and Confession of R:C*: SRIA Facsimile Publication p.29

Raziel as he and Eve left the Garden of Eden so that the human race could one day return to paradise. But the teaching was lost over time until it was given by God to Abraham as part of the covenant He made with him. The teachings were lost once more during the Egyptian enslavement and were given again to Moses after the Exodus.²

Indeed, we learn from the *Fama* that founder of the original Rosicrucian Fraternity CRC while studying with the wise men at Fez he found that:

"...their Cabala was defiled with their Religion; but notwithstanding he knew how to make good use of the same, and found still more better grounds of his Faith, altogether agreeable with the Harmony of the whole World..."³

Again from the *Fama* we learn that one of the original members of the fraternity Brother J.O.

"...was very expert, and well learned in Cabala, as his Book called H. witnesseth."⁴

The Cabala (if I may boldly put it in a nutshell) is a body of ancient Hebrew mystical doctrine which includes systems of cosmology, ontology, numerology and divination.

The basis of cabalistic tradition is the *Sepher Yetzirah* (Book of Formation). The *Sepher Yetzirah* deals with the creation of the universe by means of the ten Sephiroth (emanations), which are the archetypal numbers 1 through 10 and the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Collectively, these are known as the "32 paths of wisdom." Its emphasis is upon the sacred and archetypal nature of the letters of the alphabet.

According to a former Supreme Magus of our Society, Dr. William Wynn Wescott who made an English translation of the book from the Hebrew,

"... in the '*Sepher Yetzirah*,' God considered as the Infinite and consequently the indefinable Being, extended throughout all things by his power and existence, is while above, yet not outside of numbers, sounds and letters--the principles and general laws which we recognise."⁵

In the Book of Formation God both creates and sustains the universe through the Hebrew numerical alphabet of three mothers, seven doubles and twelve simples.

² Hopking, C.J.M. *The Practical Kabbalah Guidebook*. Godfield Press 2001. p.8

³ *Fama Fraternitatis* in *The Fame and Confession of R:C*: SRIA Facsimile Publication p.16

⁴ *ibid* p.6

⁵ *The Sepher Yetzirah* (Translated from the Hebrew by Wm. Wynn Westcott)

The Three Mothers are *Aleph*, *Mem* and *Shin*, they are Air, Water and Fire.

Seven double letters, each having two sounds associated with them *Beth*, *Gimel*, *Daleth*, *Kaph*, *Peh*, *Resh*, and *Tau* He designed, produced, and combined, and formed the Planets, the Days of the Week, and the Gates of the soul (the orifices of perception) in Man.

With the Twelve Simple Letters *Héh*, *Vau*, *Zain*, *Cheth*, *Teth*, *Yod*, *Lamed*, *Nun*, *Samech*, *Oin*, *Tzaddi* and *Qoph*; He designed, and combined, and formed with them the twelve celestial constellations of the Zodiac.

According to this doctrine of Emanations all that exists has been produced as successive emanations from the Godhead; so that all finite creatures are part of the Divine Being. These emanations, or intelligences as they are sometimes called, are the intermediary agents between the intellectual and the material worlds.

The Cabala therefore provides the keys to not only understanding the ultimate reality of nature as emanations of the Creator but also a way of interacting with nature in a truly mystical way. The cosmos is conceived as having a special relationship with number because the word of God in the scripture is written in Hebrew the language by which God spoke to Adam. and because Hebrew letters are also numbers there must be correspondences in the ultimate nature of things which are expressed through operations on number and related words and vice versa.

Frater Westcott provides the following example:

Thirty-two ... is the number of the Paths or Ways of Wisdom, [being the ten sephiroth plus the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet] 32 is written in Hebrew by LB, Lamed and Beth, and these are the last and first letters of the Pentateuch. The number 32 is obtained thus--2 x 2 x 2 x 2 x 2=32. Laib, LB as a Hebrew word, means the Heart of Man.⁶

Thus the relations between numbers, letters, words and things which are defined by cabalistic philosophy allow the cabalist not only to understand metaphysical correspondences in the universe and by doing so come to understand the divine, so far as he is able, but also to interpret the mysteries incorporated in Scripture, to discover the divine plan by the practical manipulation of such numbers, letters and words.

⁶ ibid.

It is arguable of course whether I am right to treat the mystical or spiritual as metaphysics but our ancient fratres would have thought that their philosophy did indeed reach out to the reality beyond appearances.

It is for this reason that we recommend our new Zelatores to investigate

“...the mysteries of the Kabalists (sic) which include the demonstration of the Eternal Essence of God, the key to the Government of the Universe and the powers and properties of numbers.”⁷

Earlier I stated that Metaphysical reality may be accessible through rational contemplation and this, by and large, was the method adopted by those Greek Philosophers quoted in the *Fama*.

The contemporary philosophical world view of the authors of the *Fama* was a legacy of Aristotelian physics and Pythagorean and Platonic Metaphysics. It was the world view prior to the Scientific Revolution, the seeds of which were being sown in the very decade in which the *Fama* and *Confessio* ushered in what the scholar Dame Frances Yates has termed the ‘Rosicrucian Enlightenment’.⁸

This world view had found new impetus through the Neo-Platonism of Renaissance Scholars and philosophers.

Through Plato and through Neo-Platonism the metaphysical world view was dominated by a Pythagorean Orientation to the importance of number (and indeed Geometry the extension of number in space).

This orientation originated in the sixth century BC when Pythagoras, or his followers, discovered that intervals of the musical scale correspond to the relative lengths of vibrating strings and that musical harmonies could be correlated with mathematical ratios.

The early Pythagoreans found, moreover, that these ratios hold regardless of whether the notes are produced by vibrating strings or resonating air columns. Subsequently, Pythagorean natural philosophers read musical harmonies into the universe at large. They associated the motions of the

⁷ *Zelator Grade Ritual* 1995 p.22

⁸ See Yates, Frances. *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* Routledge Classics 2002

heavenly bodies with sounds in such a way that there results a "harmony of the spheres".

The Pythagoreans further related numbers to geometrical forms: 3,6,10,15 are triangular numbers; 1,4,9,16,25 are square numbers.

Aristotle in his work now known as the *Metaphysics* tells us of the extent of Pythagorean number based philosophy:

"As in mathematics, the numbers are by nature the first thing, the Pythagoreans thought to recognize in numbers many likenesses of what exists and what will be, such as the elements of fire, air, earth, and water; they furthermore ... considered the elements of numbers to be the elements of everything existing, as everything seemed to be formed according to numbers, ... and they believed the entire vault of heaven to be harmony and numbers. One of the manifestations of numbers was supposed to be justice, another one the soul or the intellect and thus everything that exists at all. And they collected the correspondences between numbers and harmonies on the one hand and the qualities and parts of the sky on the other hand and compared them."⁹

Plato's philosophy tended to reinforce a Pythagorean orientation and natural philosophers who counted themselves "Platonists" believed in the underlying rationality of the universe and the importance of discovering it.

Indeed, the Pythagorean orientation became influential in the Christian West largely as a result of the marriage of Plato's work the *Timaeus* and Holy Scripture. In the *Timaeus* Plato described the creation of the universe by a benevolent Demiurge, who impressed a mathematical pattern upon a formless primordial matter. This account was appropriated by Christian apologists, who identified the pattern with the Divine Plan of Creation. For those who accepted this synthesis, the task of the natural philosopher is to uncover the mathematical pattern upon which the universe is ordered.

Plato suggested in that work that the five "elements"— four terrestrial and one celestial—may be correlated with the five regular solids.

He assigned the tetrahedron to fire, because the tetrahedron is the regular solid with the sharpest angles, and because fire is the most penetrating of elements. He assigned the cube to Earth, because it takes more effort to tip over a cube on its base than it does to tip over any one of the remaining three regular solids, and because Earth is the most "solid" of the elements. Plato used similar reasoning to assign the octahedron to air,

⁹ Aristotle: *Metaphysics* quoted in Schimmel, A. *The Mystery of Numbers*. OUP 1993 p.15

the icosahedron to water, and the dodecahedron to celestial matter. In addition, he suggested that transformations among water, air, and fire result from a "dissolution" of each equilateral triangular face of the respective regular solids into six 30—60—90-degree triangles, with subsequent recombination of these smaller triangles to form the faces of other regular solids.¹⁰

The "Pythagorean Orientation" is a way of viewing nature which holds that the "real" is the mathematical harmony that is present in nature. The committed Pythagorean is convinced that knowledge of this mathematical harmony is insight into the fundamental structure of the universe. The Pythagorean natural philosopher believes that mathematical relations which fit phenomena are not merely descriptive of phenomena but count as explanations of why things are as they are.

Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) had this orientation when in the *De revolutionibus* (1543), he revised Ptolemy's mathematical models by taking the sun to be (roughly) the centre of planetary motions. Indeed he appealed to Pythagorean Cosmology for authority for his moving earth model. As a committed Pythagorean, he sought mathematical harmonies in the Cosmos because he believed they were "really there".

Johannes Kepler (1571-1630), who was a contemporary of the authors of the Rosicrucian manifestos also had a Pythagorean orientation. The sun-centred system appealed to Kepler on aesthetic and theological grounds, and he devoted his life to the discovery of the mathematical harmony according to which God must have created the universe.

In his *Mysterium Cosmographicum* (1596) he stated his "nest of regular solids" theory of planetary distances. Kepler believed it to be significant that there exist just six planets and just five regular solids. Because he believed that God created the solar system according to a mathematical pattern, he sought to correlate the distances of the planets from the sun with these geometrical figures. He announced that he had succeeded in gaining insight into God's plan of creation as he had shown that the distances of the planets can be correlated with the radii of spherical shells, which are inscribed within, and circumscribed around, a nest of the five regular solids.

Kepler's arrangement was:

¹⁰ Losee, J. A. *Historical Introduction to the Philosophy of Science*. 3rd Edn. OUP 1993 p.19

Sphere of Saturn
Cube
Sphere of Jupiter
Tetrahedron
Sphere of Mars
Dodecahedron
Sphere of Earth
Icosahedron
Sphere of Venus
Octahedron
Sphere of Mercury

However, using Tycho Brahe's more accurate data, he found that these ratios differed substantially from the ratios calculated from the regular-solid theory. Kepler accepted this as a refutation of his theory, but his Pythagorean faith was unshaken. He was convinced that the discrepancies between observation and theory themselves must be a manifestation of yet to be discovered mathematical harmonies.¹¹

Even Galileo who, in the same year the *Fama* first came to light, was to make the discovery which would usher in the new world view which accompanied the Scientific Revolution expressed a Pythagorean view when he wrote:

"Philosophy is written in this grand book—I mean the universe—which stands continually open to our gaze, but it cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and interpret the characters in which it is written. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometrical figures, without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it."¹²

Whether considered from the mystical or the rational standpoints of Rosicrucian Metaphysics it can be seen that Numbers derive their powers and properties from their relationship and correspondences between Man, Nature and God.

Both systems were also compatible with that other strand of Rosicrucian Metaphysics *Hermetism*, in which Man as Microcosm is reflected through correspondences to the Macrocosm of the divinely ordered universe.

¹¹ *ibid* p.49

¹² *ibid* p.17

One of the aims of our Society is :

“...to facilitate the study of the system of Philosophy which was inculcated by the original Fratres Rosae Crucis... and to investigate the meaning and symbolism of all that now remains of the wisdom, art and literature of the ancient world”¹³

Our researches often require us to read and understand texts rich with symbolism, allegory and allusion which were authored by men who comprehended their world in a very different way from the one which we now take for granted. For this reason I believe it is necessary for the student to understand the prevailing world view of those times.

We now live in the Age of Modern Science, in which numbers and mathematical relations are merely descriptive, in which the heavenly motions are mechanical, in which the universe is stripped of ultimate purpose and in which Metaphysics is relegated to verbal disputes having no relation to verifiable fact.

But to return to our Society's objectives in our researches, as we should always strive to do, what have our ancient fratres to say to us in modern times which can help us

“...in working out the great problems of Life”¹⁴

I believe at the very least, or even fundamentally, our founding Father's philosophy serves to remind us that human consciousness and modes of expression including self-knowledge, self-fulfilment and the peace and contentment achieved through fraternal affection are not wholly encompassed by a world view stripped of metaphysics, mysticism or spirituality. Our world view may have been reduced to the mechanical but as living, organic beings, intuitively capable of a variety of conscious states, we understand that Science, and its attendant reductionist explanations of phenomena does not account for the whole of human experience - and by that I mean that it is one thing to *understand* consciousness, to *describe* spirituality and to *explain* mysticism - but it is another to *be* conscious, to *feel* spiritual and to *experience* the mystical.

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¹³ *Ordinances of the SRIA*. Revised London 1995 p.1

¹⁴ *ibid* p.1

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