

as the aggregate of the natural numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, and so forth—did not really exist, and, accordingly, could not even be approached in the character of “number.”

Cantor’s transfinite numbers are, however, nothing other than Platonic ideas, which define such an infinite, ordered aggregates through its “principle of generation.” (In the series of numbers mentioned, the principle of generation “plus 1” exists within them, such that it always increases the number by one.)

The “principle of generation” of an infinite aggregate is simply the precise idea of this aggregate, where the *many* different numbers of the aggregate are produced by the concept of *one*. That is the deeper meaning of “The One in the Many”—a concept which is brought forth by Plato in his *Parmenides* dialogue. It is brought forth by many philosophers after him, such as the Islamic Ibn Sina in the 11th Century; the Christian Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa in the 15th Century; and by Leibniz, Lessing, Goethe, and Schiller. It is proclaimed by Schiller’s aphorism:

**Truth:** *It is one only, for all, and yet seeth it everyone  
different;  
That it still one remains, maketh the different true.*

The truth, in and for itself, comes into existence in no “earthly intellect ever revealed,” Schiller also says. But yet it presents itself, and is also recognizable, if also only step-by-step in the course of development of mankind, which, by means of new creative discoveries, is in the position to gradually broaden its common treasure of knowledge.

In the history of cultures there are, however, also regressions; periods of cultural decline. In such periods, previously existing knowledge disappears; ideas understood for a long time are again lost—sometimes through natural catastrophes; often, however, solely through poor education and simple neglect.

Such an almost forgotten idea is the “One in the Many.” Really, it is already very old, but in current thinking it is almost lost, so that people still recognize the words, but no longer know their full meaning.

Thus, many important ideas have already become victims of the collective “Alzheimer’s disease,” which has occurred in our “Western” culture. Even Pope John Paul II, a representative of Platonic Christianity, criticized Western culture in his message for World Peace Day in 2001, for “a progressive impoverishment in human, spiritual, and moral” terms. Therefore, a “Dialogue Among Cultures Toward A Civilization Of Love And Peace” were all the more necessary. In a separate statement on Nov. 9, John Paul had said, “The whole of mankind still stands under the shock of the events of the past Sept. 11. It has been said, we have experienced here a veritable clash of religions. However, as I have already stated on many other occasions: This would be to annihilate the meaning of religion itself.”

## The Parable Of Rings Of ‘Nathan The Wise’

*In Gotthold Lessing’s play, Nathan the Wise. the Jew Nathan is summoned to the court of Sultan Saladin, in 1292 in Jerusalem, and asked which religion is most true.*

**Nathan:** In days of yore, there dwelt in eastern lands  
A man who had a ring of priceless worth  
Received from hands beloved. The stone it held,  
An opal, shed a hundred colors fair,  
And had the magic power that he who wore it,  
Trusting its strength, was loved of God and men.  
No wonder therefore that this eastern man  
Would never cease to wear it; and took pains  
To keep it in his household for all time.  
He left the ring to that one of his sons  
He loved the best; providing that in turn  
That son bequeath to his most favorite son  
The ring; and thus, regardless of his birth,  
The dearest son, by virtue of the ring,  
Should be the head, the prince of all his house. . . .  
At last this ring, passed on from son to son,  
Descended to a father of three sons;  
All three of whom were duly dutiful,  
All three of whom in consequence he needs  
Must love alike. But yet from time to time,  
Now this, now that one, now the third—as each  
Might be with him alone, the other two  
Not sharing then his overflowing heart—  
Seemed worthiest of the ring; and so to each  
He promised it, in pious frailty.  
This lasted while it might.—Then came the time  
For dying, and the loving father finds  
Himself embarrassed. It’s a grief to him  
To wound two of his sons, who have relied  
Upon his word.—What’s to be done?—He sends  
In secret to a jeweler, of whom  
He orders two more rings, in pattern like  
His own, and bids him spare nor cost nor toil  
To make them in all points identical.  
The jeweler succeeds. And when he brings  
The rings to him, the sire himself cannot  
Distinguish them from the original.  
In glee and joy he calls his sons to him,  
Each by himself, confers on him his blessing—  
His ring as well—and dies.—You hear me, Sultan?  
**Saladin:** I hear you!—Finish now your fable



*Nathan (right, in a recent stage adaptation from Lessing's play) is the wise Jew of Jerusalem in the time of the Crusades, who uses rings to make a parable of each religion's different search after universal truth.*

Without delay.—I'm waiting!

**Nathan:** I am done.  
For what ensues is wholly obvious.—  
Scarce is the father dead when all three sons  
Appear, each with his ring, and each would be  
The reigning prince. They seek the facts, they quarrel,  
Accuse. In vain; the genuine ring was not  
Demonstrable;—almost as little as  
Today the genuine faith. . . .

**Saladin:** The rings! Don't trifle with me! I should think  
That those religions which I named to you  
Might be distinguished readily enough.  
Down to their clothing; down to food and drink!

**Nathan:** In all respects except their basic grounds.—  
Are they not grounded all in history,  
Or writ or handed down?—But history  
Must be accepted wholly upon faith—  
Not so? Well then, whose faith are we least like  
To doubt? Our people's, surely? Those whose blood  
We share? The one who from our childhood gave  
Us proofs of love? Who never duped us, but  
When it was for our good to be deceived?

How can I trust my fathers less than you  
Trust yours? Or turn about.—Can I demand  
That to your forebears you should give the lie  
That mine be not gainsaid? Or turn about,  
The same holds true of Christians. Am I right?

**Saladin:** (*aside*) By Allah, yes! The man is right. I must  
Be still.

**Nathan:** Let's come back to our rings once more.  
As we have said: the sons preferred complaint;  
And each swore to the judge, he had received  
The ring directly from his father's hand.—  
As was the truth! And long before had had

His father's promise, one day to enjoy  
The privilege of the ring. No less than truth!  
His father, each asserted, could not have  
Been false to him; and sooner than suspect  
This thing of him, of such a loving father;  
He must accuse his brothers—howsoever  
Inclined in other things to think the best  
Of them—of some false play; and he the traitors  
Would promptly ferret out; would take revenge.

**Saladin:** And then, the judge? I am all ears to hear. . . .

**Nathan:** Thus said the judge: unless you swiftly bring  
Your father here to me, I'll bid you leave  
My judgment seat. Think you that I am here  
For solving riddles? Would you wait, perhaps,  
Until the genuine ring should rise and speak?  
But stop! I hear the genuine ring enjoys  
The magic power to make its wearer loved,  
Beloved of God and men. That must decide!  
For spurious rings can surely not do that!  
Whom then do two of you love most? Quick, speak!  
You're mute? The rings' effect is only backward,  
Not outward? Each one loves himself the most?—  
O then you are, all three, deceived deceivers!  
Your rings are false, all three. The genuine ring  
No doubt got lost. To hide the grievous loss,  
To make it good, the father caused three rings  
To serve for one.

**Saladin:** O splendid, splendid!

**Nathan:** So,  
The judge went on, if you'll not have my counsel,  
Instead of verdict, go! My counsel is:  
Accept the matter wholly as it stands.  
If each one from his father has his ring,  
Then let each one believe his ring to be  
The true one.—Possibly the father wished  
To tolerate no longer in his house  
The tyranny of just one ring! And know:  
That you, all three, he loved; and loved alike;  
Since two of you he'd not humiliate  
To favor one. Well then! Let each aspire  
To emulate his father's unbeguiled,  
Unprejudiced affection! Let each strive  
To match the rest in bringing to the fore  
The magic of the opal in his ring!  
Assist that power with all humility,  
With benefaction, hearty peacefulness,  
And with profound submission to God's will!  
And when the magic powers of the stones  
Reveal themselves in children's children's children,  
I bid you, in a thousand thousand years,  
To stand again before this seat. For then  
A wiser man than I will sit as judge  
Upon this bench, and speak. Depart!—So said  
The modest judge.