

ON THE CONCEPT OF THE UNIVERSE AS A 'LIMITED WHOLE'

6.45 To view the world *sub specie aeterni* is to view it as a whole—a limited whole. Feeling the world as a limited whole—it is this that is mystical.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*,
D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, trans. (London : Routledge
and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1961).

In the history of human thought there has been the perennial desire to have a complete, consistent and final grasp of the Universe as a limited whole. This tendency can be found in Science in the attempt to 'find' laws of such generality that they explain everything and apply to everything. This tendency can be found in Philosophy in its persistent desire to picture reality as an inter-connected and on-going process. And in religion and mysticism there is the All in One, and One in All grasped through intellection or illumination—a Unity and ecstasy far surpassing any understanding. And when successful, all these endeavors end in a mystical apprehension and in that they seem united on common ground.

1. I would want to dispute in many ways the success of such a grasp of things entire. But I shall contain my remarks to a partial analysis of the notion of "whole." Let it be remembered though that for each and every act of consciousness there is an implicit sense of unity and "wholeness" about it. We can only think about the world (as a whole) because we have experiences of it; and we can experience the world (as a whole) because we have thoughts about it. Grounded in this developing and continuing interaction is our sense of an enduring unity and self, which is the manifestation of the possibilities of experiencings. That we see the Universe as a "limited whole" is an act of an experiencing agent and his conceptualization. This is unique for each act of apprehension. Any view of the Universe as a

“limited whole” is not a quality of the Universe, but a quality of such an apprehension existing *within* the Universe. Thus the *projection* of the essential and necessary feature of consciousness is the key to the feeling of the Universe being a “limited whole”. Apart from this, the *Universe is as it can be seen to be*; and if it is seen to be in any way it must be seen somewhat consistently and/or connectedly (otherwise it is not ‘seen’) but not necessarily as a “limited whole”—the “seen” is seen in “limited wholes,” but never is this true of the Universe, or any All.

2. It is never the case that we can know—in any sense of the word ‘know’—or apprehend, or have a direct experience of the Universe as a whole, or as acting as a whole. The Universe, of course, may very well be infinite and an “*sumunified*” aggregate, though (*all*) things within it may have unities and be “wholes”. A ‘limited whole’ may be like “consciousness”—applicable only to special parts of the Universe and not to the Universe itself.

3. To speak of the Universe, or anything for that matter, as a ‘*limited whole*’ is to be able to contrast it with something else. And if there is nothing else to which it can be contrasted then such a predication is vacuous. Even if the Universe were finite, it could indeed be called “limited” or a “sum-total of . . .” It could be called “THE (LIMITED) WHOLE”. (Then the word “WHOLE” becomes synonymous with the word “Universe”, but the Universe could not be called a “whole” since to be a whole is to be related *with* and *to* other entities in an interaction). The word ‘whole’ means a sum-total of . . . whatever you wish to designate, but in relation to other designated wholes, or units. It is the word ‘Universe’ that means “sum-total” in the sense of “all that there is and ever can be”.

Can there be two Universes? Not if “Universe” means “every-thing that there is or can be,” because there cannot be two *everything(s)*. Nor paradoxically can you call such a Universe “One”: If there cannot be *two*, there cannot be any “*One*”. Consequently if the Universe is called a Unity, a One, a Whole . . . this signifies a reification of facets of our self-consciousness and *not* of the linguistic meanings of these terms.

4. There are some words that can be applied to anything and everything; and everything and anything can be called by those names: existence; thing; unity; being; identity; universe; nature; . . . are high-generality, without exception, concepts. (They can be shown not to be "concepts" in a strict sense.) What is *not* an existence? What is *not* a thing?—An illusion? An Hallucination? They are illusion-things or existents. They have hallucinatory existence—that's the kind of *thing* they are.

These words do not convey any information. They say something about everything hence they say nothing in particular about anything. Or another way of putting it: they refer to everything and thereby refer to nothing specifically. If all things were only of one shade of red, we would not know red, and we would not know color. And if by some strange coincidence we did know red under these circumstances, *saying* that something was red would not convey any information.

Kant's insight that existence is not a predicate in that it does not add anything to the concept of a thing, is correct. Saying that I have an idea of a brown cow, or a blue mermaid, and saying that brown cow, or blue mermaid, *exists* does not enlarge my concept. My concept remains the same. What I have done is assert that I believe there is a further reference and consequence to my concept other than its being (solipsistically) present in my imagination, and that some ostensive definition might be found for it. Or if I do not believe this, then I am merely stating that my concept is an actual occurrence, though limited to my private consciousness and possibly to the private conceptualizations of others.

So we must say is the case with the words "whole", and "thing", and "existence" and "being" and the others above. They don't in any way change the concept which is had, by their addition to that concept. We now add to this that the reason why the word existence and other such "exceptionless" words of high-generality are not predicates is that they apply indiscriminately to each thing and to all things, hence to no particular thing. The word "whole" thus has no *content*.

But also, the word "whole"—and this applies to the other words listed above and to a few others—does not as we have seen in 3.—above, even have a referent when applied to the Universe, since there would be no other Universe in comparison to which it can have a reference and hence derive its meaning from such a reference. And if there were some such other Universe then you would not have grasped the Universe *as* a 'limited whole' but you would have grasped a 'limited whole' *of* the Universe.

If this cursory analysis is correct, then this would serve as a starting-point for the refutation that the Universe can in any way be known as a "whole." For if the Universe could ever be known as a "whole", nothing would be known, since "whole" imparts no knowledge. And if the Universe were *known*, it would not be, and could not be known, *as* a "whole", but as "**THE WHOLE**", meaning the Universe, or "everything that is" (which is tautologous and amounts to saying "I know the Universe is the Universe, because the Universe is the Universe"). The world as a whole *sub specie aeterni* must indeed be only a feeling, but never knowledge.
