



## The Skeptics SA guide to Numerology

Numerology, (from the Latin ‘numerus’, number, plus the Greek ‘logos’, word), also known as Arithmancy or Numeromancy, is essentially a form of divination using numbers in various ways. It is based upon the primitive belief that ‘there is an occult relationship existing between numbers and letters and the whole fabric and machinery of the cosmos’ (Rakoczi, 1970, p 108).

Numerology claims to be the study of the alleged magical properties of numbers, especially one to nine, each of which, like musical notes, is claimed to possess a unique vibrational frequency. According to this belief system, since an individual’s birth date and name, as well as all letters and words, can be expressed as numbers between one and nine, these reveal their essential nature, and their metaphysical relationship to the numerical principles that underpin the cosmos.

The need to use mathematics to calculate an individual’s secret numerical value appears to convince many that Numerology is a special art, a superior form of divination. However, despite this pretentious pseudo-scientific nonsense, Numerology is nothing more than an elaborate form of deception, which relies on human gullibility and self-delusion.

Numerology has three principal forms:

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**Chaldean:** This system used the sounds, vibrations, of the numbers one to eight

**Kabbalah or Cabbala:** This system developed out of a stream of Hebrew mystical teaching, and was based upon the Hebrew alphabet of 22 letters. It was used to interpret the mystical meanings of names only

### **Pythagorean or Modern Western**

**Numerology:** Although claimed to originate with Pythagoras, this system is probably much older. Few details of the Pythagorean system survived, but modern Numerologists make the dubious claim that it was based on a belief that a relationship existed between a cosmic system of numbers and the events in a person’s life. The modern system, which claims to be based on these principles, has two basic forms:

- **Names:** this technique assigns each letter of the alphabet a numerical value from one to nine; the letters of a person’s name are added together and, if the final number is more than one digit, these were added together until ultimately a single digit is reached
- **Birth Date:** the numbers in a person’s birthdate are added together, if the final number is more than one digit, these are added together until a single digit is reached.

Numbering originated in very ancient times as a means of keeping an independent tally of possessions. At first it probably involved counting on the fingers, or using ‘counting sticks’ or stones, to record tallies, however as societies became more complex they needed more sophisticated systems to keep track of the movement of the Sun, the Moon and the stars, not only for agriculture needs, but also for determining the exact dates for religious festivals so that they could be celebrated at the same time each year.

Over time individual numbers began to take on special significance. One came to represent the number of the supreme deity, while Two represented the dualistic nature of the universe, light and darkness, good and evil, day and night, the male-female principles, the yin and yang.

The number Three was an unusually mystical number, filled with spiritual essence. The cosmos was believed to comprise three parts, the heavens, the Earth and the waters, or the abyss. Three was an important part in the Vedic, Greek, Roman, Celtic, Teutonic and Christian religious traditions. Deities with a triune nature became a common feature of many religious traditions including the Egyptian, Babylonian, Persian, Hindu and Christian. Thus we

find that the Egyptians represented the supreme deity, the Sun, in three separate forms, while in Christianity we find the concept of the divine Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

Three became part of everyday usage, expressed in such forms as high, medium and low; up, down and middle, and even became a basic part of language structure, so that to emphasize a particular point it was repeated three times, e.g. Churchill's first speech in parliament 'What is our aim? I can answer in one word. It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be.'

To the ancients numbers had a fundamentally mystical significance, thought to possess a metaphysical, creative principle from which all things in the cosmos were formed. Others believed that during the creation, their particular deity had used mystical numerically based principles; as Barrett (1801) observed,

"All things, which were first made by the nature of things in its first age, seem to be formed by the proportion of numbers; for this was the principal pattern in the mind of the Creator." (p 101)

Early humans noted the heavens followed a regular cycle, rising and setting after a precise number of hours, or days. In an imprecise and insecure world the regular movement of the heavens provided a sense of security, for even during the harshest Winter it was understood that after a certain period of time the warmth of the sun would return and, once again life would return to normal.

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This heavenly sequence appears to have been the basis of the Macrocosm-Microcosm concept, the ancient belief that the Macrocosm, the 'great cosmos' and Earth — the Microcosm or 'small cosmos' — were inexorably interconnected, so that everything that occurred on Earth, was a reflection of heavenly events. Since the Macrocosm operated according to mystical numerical principles, it was assumed the same principles had a profound influence on everyday human life.

The ancients did not believe in a random universe, for them, everything that happened was for a reason. Thus, such important and significant events, such as the time of birth and the names they were given, were perceived as the subtle reflections of the mystical and universal power of numbers, whose influences would persist throughout their entire life.

It is not known precisely when Numerology evolved, but it appears that certain mystics and scholars, believing that the mystical lore of numbers contained the secrets of the powers of nature, began quite early to use the magical arts in an attempt to uncover these secret powers. Thus, although Numerology is commonly attributed to the Greek philosopher Pythagoras, it seems more likely that it evolved much earlier, possibly in Mesopotamia. However, it was amongst the Greek philosophers and mathematicians that a form of Numerology reached its zenith, in particular with Pythagoras and his followers, who believed the entire nature and purpose of the cosmos could be explained in the ratios between the first ten numbers.

The Pythagoreans were preoccupied with determining the mystical principles underlying numbers that influenced the operation of the cosmos. They understood that there was a natural numerical cycle of heavenly phenomena and, on the Earth, they found evidence that many natural forms had a numerical basis, e.g. the natural spiral patterns of certain shells.

They made a series of discoveries concerning the properties of whole numbers and were particularly interested in the numerical relationships of harmonics. They noted that the sound made by a vibrating string was related to its length, and that by varying the length of the string, the notes could be changed in accordance with a strict mathematical formula.

Eventually they linked mathematics with a grand esoteric numerical design that pervaded the whole of nature. This use of numbers to deal with philosophical concepts is now considered to be a form of pseudo-mathematics, and has long been discarded by legitimate mathematicians.

Given the natural insecurity of humans, the idea that relationships existed between physical objects, events and human beings, and that it might be possible to use such information to determine what events lay in their future, must have been very appealing. It was this need that led to the development of hundreds of forms of divination, of which Numerology was but one.

Because the principles underlying the Numerology taught by Pythagoras and his followers were considered to be so sacred, they were never written down, and, as a result, details

of their numerological techniques were lost. However other numerological techniques existed and in one form, the process of attributing numerical values to strings of letters was reintroduced in the Cabbalistic texts of medieval times. Then, in the twentieth century, American author L Dow Balliett introduced in a series of books comprising a great deal of metaphysical hot-air, what is often referred to as 'the modern phase of Numerology'.

She stressed the importance of cosmic 'vibrations', no doubt based upon the Pythagorean concept of the music of the spheres, to which had been added more modern ideas. According to Cavendish (1967), 'Numerology is simply an extended study of vibration' (p 75), and Bailliett's idea of a vibrating universe was apparently purloined from legitimate discoveries that the atoms in matter 'vibrated', and appears to have been an attempt to attribute a degree of scientific respectability to what was is really metaphysical nonsense.

Essentially there are two main approaches used in modern Numerological divination:

- Adding the numerical values of the letters in a person's name
- Adding up the numbers in an individual's date of birth.

The first method of numerical divination, Arithmancy, was based upon a belief 'that the name of a thing contains the essence of its being' (Cavendish, 1967, p 54). Like numbers, the letters of early alphabets were revered as sacred; the sounds of each letter was believed to contain certain magical numerical proper-

ties as well as its own unique 'cosmic vibration'. It was believed that by adding up the individual values of the letters in the name most commonly used by an individual, including their nickname, and constantly reducing that number until a number between one and nine was obtained, one would be able to discern the hidden metaphysical characteristics of that person.

Originally, the main use of Arithmancy was to establish the degree of relationship between humans and the deities, and, in particular, which of two or more candidates were most favoured by the gods. Arithmancy also taught that although a person's future was predetermined, by allowing them to glimpse their possible future, they could take steps to they could take steps to intervene, and, so change the potential outcome of their life.

Widely practised in the Hellenic world, especially amongst the Pythagoreans and the Platonists, it too was attributed to Pythagoras, however it appears that it too originated in ancient Mesopotamia as a form of Chaldean Numerology.

The second method, which was very similar, used the numbers in a person's date of birth, adding them, and then reducing the total until a single digit number was reached. This final number represented the secret numerical characteristics of the individual, 'the stamp which the mysterious forces that move the universe impressed on your character and destiny at the moment when you were born' (Cavendish, 1967, p 61).

One particularly nonsensical aspect of Numerology is the illogical concept of 'lucky' and 'unlucky' numbers, the belief that certain numbers, such as seven, are luckier than other numbers, and that some, such as thirteen, are 'unlucky'. Although in any form of gambling each number has an equal chance of occurring, people tend to 'play' numbers which they believe are luckier than the others.

Such beliefs are especially noticeable amongst certain cultural groups; for example the Chinese who consider the number eight especially lucky. They will often pay large sums of money to purchase car number plates that contain a series of eights. However, the numbers have absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with subsequent events, as is evidenced by the following newspaper report:

"A Hong Kong businessman died when his Ferrari with the 'lucky' number plate 888 crashed and burst into flames in a suspected road race. Chan Ki-wo is believed to have been racing at more than 100km/h on a highway on Sunday. One of the few things to survive the blaze was its 'lucky' number plate LE888." (*The Advertiser*, 2007).

The validity of Numerology can be best summed up by columnist Ostrow (1996), who wrote of her experience as a young woman seeking to find the cosmic significance of her troubled life. She consulted Rohinini, 'reputed to be one of the most respected numerologists in the world' and who, her friends had assured her, was, "so accurate it was 'totally scary'".

He determined she was a 'nine — a special number' that explained why she was having so many personal problems. Her heart was pounding, and she felt chills in her spine as he explained,

"You are always searching for meaning. You feel frustrated because the meaning of life keeps eluding you ... There is a lot of sadness around love for you because reality never matches your expectations."

But he assured her, very soon, she would meet a tall, handsome man,

"A man involved in money ... perhaps a wealthy business tycoon. He will seek you out!"

"Oh Rohinini, how can the numbers know so much about me?" I asked when the awesome session had finished. I was trembling. I wanted to kiss Rohinini's fat, thonged feet. "They just know," he said earnestly.'

He then explained how he had determined she was a nine; he added her day of birth 26, to the month and year of her birth to obtain the figure 36 which, when added together, gave the number nine. However, as Ostrow pointed out the final total was actually 35, which, when added together, made her an eight, not a nine. Embarrassed he apologized and admitted she was in fact an eight not a nine.

"There was an awful moment of silence. Then he said: "Look, it doesn't matter really. I mean, ummm, eight and nine are on the same grid so in reality they have

almost identical traits." He quickly tallied some new figures and said, "That will be \$45, Ruth", and pushed me out the front door.'

## References

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## Skeptics SA

### The South Australian branch of the Australian Skeptics

For further information on the Australian Skeptics and the journal, *the Skeptic*, contact:

Skeptics SA, <info@skepticssa.org.au>

Web site: <www.skepticssa.org.au>