The problem of the One and the Many is the central problem of philosophy and epistemology. Throughout history, it has been the single most important issue for philosophers. It relates to just about everything. The problem of the One and the Many relates not only to epistemology, but also to ethics, politics, economics, and other practical realms. William James wrote:

“I wish to turn [pragmatisms] light upon the ancient problem of ‘the one and the many.’ I suspect that in but few of you has this problem occasioned sleepless nights, and I should not be astonished if some of you told me it had never vexed you. I myself have come, by long brooding over it, to consider it the most central of all philosophic problems, central because so pregnant. I mean by this that if you know whether a man is a decided monist or a decided pluralist, you perhaps know more about the rest of his opinions than if you give him any other name ending in ISM. To believe in the one or in the many, that is the classification with the maximum number of consequences.”

The problem of the One and the Many asks us what the relation of unity is to diversity and vice versa. What is the relation of the general to the particular? How does an individual tree relate to the category of trees? What is the “ideal form” of treeness? What characteristics are essential to trees? Is the category of trees something that pre-exists, so that we classify trees as “trees” because there really is such a thing as trees? Do we classify trees as “trees” because there is really a category of trees in which they fit? Do we call them “trees” because they happen to resemble some “ideal form” of treeness? Or, do we just see the various particular trees and generalize them, creating a category in our own minds in order to classifying them. Which is more essential: the one category of trees or the many particular trees that fit into that category?

The answer to this question does have practical importance. It has practical consequences in basically every area imaginable. How you answer this question affects what your views on ethics, politics, economics, and even practical epistemological method will be. The strict monist will tend towards statism and mysticism, while the strict pluralist will tend towards libertine anarchy and scientism.

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1 Pragmatism, Lecture IV
In the area of politics and ethics, those thinkers who emphasize the One, like Marx and Plato, have emphasized society to the point of absolutely deifying it in the form of the State. And certain individualists, like John Zerzan, have went the other way, putting so much emphasis on individuals that they have totally neglected society and advocate the abolition of society in a return to primitivism. Too much emphasis on the One leads to an absolutely selfless ethical theory, total altruism, where the individual is neglected altogether. Too much emphasis on the Many leads to a negative sort of individualism, the Randian “virtue of selfishness,” and Stirner’s egoist ethics.

In the area of epistemology, the one-and-many problem is central because most human knowledge traces back to compare-and-contrast analyses. When we discover something that we are not familiar with, we compare it to similar things that we are familiar with and then contrast it against dissimilar things that we are familiar with. We analyze how it is the same as other things and how it is different from other things. In order for us to comprehend the new found object at all, we must have both similarity (the One) and difference (the Many). When one becomes a monist, accepting the One as the most essential, we find that knowledge is thereby rendered impossible. If everything is ultimately one or ultimately reducible to a single substance or thing, then differentiation is really just illusory. No real contrast could ever take place. Consequently, no real compare-and-contrast analysis could take place, meaning that half of our analysis of any given thing must always be fictitious and based upon a misunderstanding or illusion. All knowledge would therefore be false. Human knowledge would therefore be impossible. Yet if one says that the Many is ultimate, becoming a pluralist, then we find a reversal of the situation that leads to the same problem. If all the many different things are really just unrelated disparate particulars, then the general categories into which we classify them are fictitious. In this case, we are merely forcing things into artificial categories in an effort to “rationalize the irrational.”

Historically, many philosophers have opted for one of these positions or the other—either monism or pluralism. However, a select few have been bold enough to set the One and the Many on a par, making them both equally ultimate. Usually, this is done by equating the One and the Many. In Hindu philosophy, for instance, they might say that Brahman/God (the One) is absolute and that everything that exists (the Many) is simultaneously an emanation from and a manifestation of Brahman. Brahman is defined as everything that exists, encompassing the many in a pantheistic fashion, and uniting it all under the singleness of Brahman. Christian philosophy says that God has

\[2\text{ Cf. Cornelius van Til}\]
a single essence (the One), which encompasses, and manifests as, three separate persons (the Many) within the ontological Trinity. God is conceived as “absolutely simple” or “totally singular” and yet “triadic” or multiple. According to the theological notion of perichoresis, the entire essence of the Godhead is contained in each of the persons individually, so that each person individually contains the other two persons as well. The relation of the essence (the One) to the persons (the Many) is one of identity. And the categories into which we classify things are contained in the single mind of God, so that each thing that we classify is being placed into a pre-existent category, so that we are merely “thinking God’s thoughts after Him.”

So, the Hindu and the Christian philosophers have typically “resolved” the problem by identifying the One and the Many. A few others, such as William James, have taken an alternative position, holding that the relation of the One to the Many is neither identity nor difference. The general is not the same as the particular, yet neither is it different from it. William James “abjures absolute monism and absolute pluralism” and argues that “the oneness and the manyness are absolutely co-ordinate here. Neither is primordial or more essential or excellent than the other.”

The four approaches discussed above are typically conceived as the only possible solutions. The Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna (ca. 150-250AD) has demonstrated that all of these typical solutions to the problem are actually impossible—none of the four solutions to the one-many problem can possibly be true. Peter Kakol writes:

“Now Nagarjuna’s tetralemma considers the relation between two opposing concepts or positions, let’s call them X and non-X. There are four possibilities: (1) X and non-X are identical, or interdependent; (2) X and non-X are different, or mutually independent; (3) X and non-X are both identical and different; (4) X and non-X are neither identical nor different. Nagarjuna argues that neither identity nor difference can supply us with an understanding of the relation between X and non-X, for in the case of identity (or mutual dependence) there are no longer two different terms to be related, so there can be no relation; and in the case of difference (or mutual independence), the relation must itself be a third thing between the two terms and thus itself needs to be related to the terms by the addition of further relations regressing to infinity, so again there can be no relation. And the combination of identity and difference—either as a conjunction or a double-negation (these are logically equivalent)—gets us nowhere, as this is

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3 Cf. Cornelius van Til
4 Pragmatism, Lecture IV
clearly self-contradictory. (1995: 36-7, 54; 1997: 169-70, 187) The conclusion which Nagarjuna draws from this analysis is that the search for the relation between any two conceptual opposites is open-ended, like infinitely empty space, and thus unsuccessful. This is the meaning of *sunyata*, which is usually translated into English as ‘emptiness’; but a more accurate translation, which takes account of both contextual usage and intertextual references, is ‘openness’ or ‘open-endedness’. This translation better illustrates the identity between *pratitya-samutpada* and *sunyata*. As Nancy McCagney puts it: ‘*Pratitya samutpada* is the arising and ceasing of dharmas which are indeterminate (animitta) and open-ended (*sunyata*)”5

The four typical solutions to the one-many problem are logical impossibilities, as Nagarjuna pointed out. Peter Kakol follows Charles Hartshorne in looking to *entailment* as an alternative solution. *Entailment* is a situation in which there is a one-way dependence, such that X entails Y but Y does not necessarily entail X. For instance, the statement “John Doe was murdered” entails that “John Doe is dead,” but “John Doe is dead” does not necessarily imply “John Doe was murdered.” In the case of ordinary identity or difference, the relation of two terms is symmetrical, so that both imply the other, whereas a relation of entailment is an asymmetrical relation. Peter Kakol writes:

“This reciprocal conjunction of one-way relations, in which one is a relation to actual events and the other a relation to potential events, I will call ‘asymmetrical interdependence’.... Asymmetrical interdependence is thus the principle that a universal is independent of any given particular, but dependent on the totality of particulars from which it is an abstraction, which is one of the key insights of process philosophy.”6

Similarities exist among things that are different. The general categories emerge from these similarities. We see similarities among various particular things that are different, and we generalize to the category. We do not do this because we are “rationalizing the irrational,” but because the similarities actually do exist. The similarities that do exist are the basis for our classifying things into general categories, by placing like with like. Peter Kakol’s notion of *asymmetrical interdependence* indicates that there are two cases of entailment, one case from X to Y and another from Y to X. They each depend upon the other but in different ways. The One depends upon the Many and the Many depends upon the One, but the dependence is not

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5 Peter Kakol, *Asymmetrical Interdependence: An Integration of Buddhism and Process Philosophy*

6 Peter Kakol, *Asymmetrical Interdependence: An Integration of Buddhism and Process Philosophy*
symmetrical. The one category into which we classify things depends upon the characteristic similarities of the many particulars that we have placed into that category, yet the particulars as part of that category, as things that are classified rather than being just disparate particulars, depend upon the category for the meaning that we have assigned to them. Linguistically, we classify them with words that presuppose the existence of a category. So, the relation between the One and the Many is one of asymmetrical interdependence. The Many depend upon the One (for us, at least) insofar as we cannot speak about the Many without the One, yet any one of those particulars could theoretically exist even if the rest of them ceased to exist (and if the rest of the Many ceased to exist, the category would cease to exist as a generalization from the particulars). The One depends upon the Many insofar as it is a generalization from the particulars. Without all those particulars, the categories could not exist, yet each of the many particulars, taken individually, can be eliminated without destroying the category. The One is dependent upon the Many as a whole, but is independent of each of the particulars of the Many in isolation.

This particular solution to the problem of the One and the Many is probably the only good solution that has ever been proposed. All of the typical solutions are logically impossible. They can be falsified. This solution, however, is the only solution that we have found that has not been falsified. So, until this solution is proven wrong, we will operate on the assumption that it is the correct solution. We can hold to this hypothesis of asymmetrical interdependence tentatively. Following Karl Popper’s method of critical rationalism, we can hold to this position until it is demonstrated to be untenable. Our knowledge here, as everywhere, is conjectural rather than absolute.

Furthermore, Peter Kakol proposes a relational ontology. Relational ontology is the idea that the essence/substance of a thing emerges from relations. A person is not a thing in itself. A person is a cluster of relations to other things. These relations take on a persona and become an individual that is greater than all of its constituent parts put together. Peter Kakol writes:

“But these experienced relations are not self-existent things; rather, they are pratayya, or conditioned entities in which experience and experiencer are one. That is, the subject of the relation is itself the relation, and the object is itself a shorthand for an open-ended series of relations of relation of relations of ....”

Peter Kakol, Asymmetrical Interdependence: An Integration of Buddhism and Process Philosophy
In other words, things are not things in themselves—persons are not atomized individuals. Humans, for instance, emerge from a complex series of relations. The relations of atoms and microscopic particles and countless tiny lifeforms combine to create our body. The person emerges from a complex of relations. And there is an asymmetrical relation of the One and the Many within each individual. The person is independent of any one particular particle that constitutes his body, yet depends on the totality of all of those particulars taken together. There are internal relations from which the person emerges. On the other hand, there are external relations that also matter. The personality of a person is developed in a particular way due to relations that the person has with his environment and with other persons. If we isolated a person and abstracted him from all of these relations, he would cease to exist. Looking at the asymmetrical interdependence of the One and the Many within each person, we might conclude that Nikolai Berdyaev was correct in positing the “concrete universality of personality.” The many concrete particulars are united within the universal of the person that they comprise, and that persona becomes a *concrete universal*, a particular universal.  

As I have argued above, how you answer the One-Many problem has profound implication in the area of political philosophy. The absolute monist will tend towards statism or absolute collectivism/socialism. The absolute pluralist will tend towards an egoist variety of individualism, primitivism, and chaotic “anarchism.” Someone who takes Kakol’s approach to the One-Many problem, however, might advocate a *social individualist* or *mutualist* approach. This person would tend towards true anarchism, anarchism in the sense of “order without violence.” Kakol writes:

"*Social Individualism*, [is] based on the realisation that we are social animals that need to cooperate, and that the full development of each person’s individuality and freedom is dependent on equality and cooperation. This is a truth that is not realised by most today due to the prevalent belief that individuality, the desire to be separate from others, is incompatible with collectivism, the desire to merge with others in social togetherness. But we must acknowledge that these two desires do exist within us, each one struggling to become dominant. What is needed is a Middle Way between these two, a balance that comes when we realise that all things, including people, are interdependent and cannot exist separately; for there is only unity-in-diversity and diversity-in-unity, both the One and the

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8 Perhaps all of these *concrete universals* are constituent parts of a higher concrete universal, like the cosmic body of Vishnu, where the universe itself takes on a persona and the worlds that exist are just like atoms within the body of the universal organism. It’s an interesting idea, but we do not have sufficient evidence to make any real declaration about this.
Many being of equal importance….Yet the individual is more important than society, for although society can neither be a mere collection of atomised individuals nor a monolithic totality in which individuals are merged into a herd-like conformity, nevertheless, the individual is the beginning and end of our endeavours, while society is merely the means to this end; for society is an abstraction—it is the individual that is the concrete reality. The aim of each individual is self-mastery: the development of his or her full potentiality, to unfold and blossom forth in full flower; but this can only happen if the perfect nurturing environment exists, one in which all people cooperate socially such that no one rises above any other, but all develop equally, yet in different individual directions spontaneously and naturally without hindrance. For we can only unfold our full potential naturally, without being hindered by others and artificial barriers such as interfering laws, which cause stagnation. It is the belief of anarchists that both capitalism and Statism retard such growth and development of people’s characters, and thus must be replaced with Stateless socialism. For capitalism and the State create a parasitic society in which only the lucky few are allowed to develop full individuality at the expense of the many, which is not in accord with justice.”

9 Peter Kakol, *Ten Anarchist Principles*