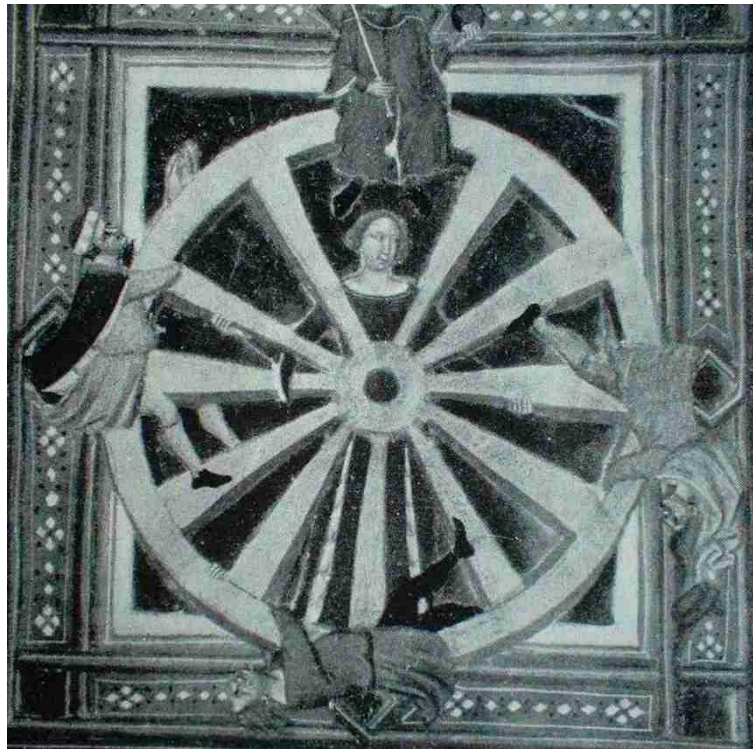


WHEEL



This is a symbol, wide in scope, much used in the ornamental arts and in architecture, complex and enclosing several layers of meaning. Some of the disagreement about its symbolic sense may be due to confusion of the disk (which is immobile) with the wheel (which rotates). There is, however, no objection to the fusion of the two symbols with a view to reconciling the two ideas of the disk and the wheel. One of the elementary forms of wheel-symbolism consists of the sun as a wheel, and of ornamental wheels as solar emblems. As Krappe has pointed out, the concept of the sun as a wheel was one of the most widespread notions of antiquity. The idea of the sun as a two-wheeled chariot is only at one remove from this. These same ideas can be found among the Aryans and also among the Semites. Given the symbolic significance of the sun as a source of light (standing for intelligence) and of spiritual illumination, it is easy to understand why the Buddhist doctrine of the solar wheel has been so widely admired. 'Catherine-wheels', and the 'wheel of fire' rolled down the hillside in popular festivals of the summer-solstice; and the mediaeval processions in which wheels were mounted on boats or carts, as well as the torture-on-the-wheel; and such traditions as the 'Wheel of Fortune' or the 'Wheel of the Year', all point to a deeply rooted solar or zodiacal symbolism. The function of the wheel of-fire was, in essence, to 'stimulate' the sun in its activity and to ward off winter and death. It is, therefore, a symbolic synthesis of the activity of cosmic forces and the passage of time. There is, it must be admitted, a discrepancy between the interpretation of those who see the wheel particularly as a solar symbol, and those who relate it to the symbolism of the pole (although basically both allude to the mystery of the rotational tendency of all cyclic processes). The swastika, being an intermediate sign between the cross and the wheel, is similarly regarded by some as a solar and by others as a polar sign. Guénon tends towards the latter hypothesis. But, in any case, the allusion is, in the last resort, to the splitting up of the world-order into two essentially different factors: rotary movement and immobility – or the perimeter of the wheel and its still centre, an image of the Aristotelian 'unmoved mover'. This becomes an obsessive theme in mythic thinking, and in alchemy it takes the form of the contrast between the volatile (moving and therefore transitory) and the fixed. The dual

structure of the wheel is usually indicated by characteristic patterns which tend to confine geometric ornamentation—either stylized or figurative—to the periphery, while the round, empty space in the middle is either left vacant, or a single symbol is inscribed therein—a triangle, for instance, or a sacred figure. Guénon notes that the Celtic wheel-symbol persisted into the Middle Ages, and adds that the ornamental *oculi* of Romanesque churches and the rose-windows of Gothic architecture are versions of this wheel. He also shows that there is an indubitable connexion between the wheel and such emblematic flowers as the rose (in the West) and the lotus (in the East)—in other words, figures patterned after the mandala. The rim of the wheel is divided into sectors illustrating phases in the passage of time.

In alchemy, there are numerous symbolic representations of the wheel, denoting the circulatory process: the ascending period is shown on one side, the descending on the other. These alchemic stages are also represented as birds soaring heavenwards or swooping down to earth, denoting sublimation and condensation, in turn corresponding to evolution and involution, or spiritual progress and regression. The 'Wheel of Law, Truth and Life' is one of the eight emblems of good luck in Chinese Buddhism. It illustrates the way of escape from the illusory world (of rotation) and from illusions, and the way towards the 'Centre'. The wheel which is divided up into sectors by radii drawn from its outer perimeter to the circumference of an inner circle, is a graphic symbol sometimes seen in water-marks of mediaeval times over a plant-stem located between the horns of an ox (symbolizing sacrifice); Bayley opines that this wheel represents the 'communion of saints', or the reunion of the faithful in the mystic Centre.

René Guénon says, in relation to Taoist doctrine, that the chosen one, the sage, invisible at the centre of the wheel, moves it without himself participating in the movement and without having to bestir himself in any way. He quotes, among others, the following Taoist passages: 'The sage is he who has attained the central point of the Wheel and remains bound to the "Unvarying Mean", in indissoluble union with the Origin, partaking of its immutability and imitating its non-acting activity'; 'He who has reached the highest degree of emptiness, will be secure in repose. To return to the root is to enter into the state of repose', that is, to throw off the bonds of things transitory and contingent.

WHEEL OF FORTUNE



The tenth enigma of the Tarot pack. It is an allegory which turns upon the general symbolism of the wheel. Based upon the symbolism of the number two, it expresses the equilibrium of the contrary forces of contraction and expansion—the principle of polarity. The wheel is set in motion by a handle—fateful because it is irreversible—and it is floating on a figurative

representation of the ocean of chaos, supported by the masts of two boats which are joined one to the other; in each boat there is a snake, symbolizing the two principles of the active and the passive. The ascending half of this wheel has an effigy of Hermanubis and his caduceus, while the descending portion displays a Typhon-like monster with its trident; the two halves symbolize respectively the constructive and destructive forces of existence, the first figure being related to the constellation of Canis, and the second to Capricorn (denoting, within the symbolism of the Zodiac, the principle of dissolution initiated in Pisces). Above the wheel, this allegorical card has a motionless sphinx, alluding to the mystery of all things and the intermingling of the disparate.

J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, Translated from the Spanish by Jack Sage. Foreword by Herbert Read, Routledge, London, pp. 370 - 372.