

Much Ado About Something, Like Zero

Written by Alex Baer

Sunday, 02 December 2012 18:00

Nothingness is not a void: It is something on its own, and something all its own, too.

Feel as though you've fallen down a philosophical rabbit hole? You're in good company.

Perhaps this question will help shed some light on the matter: Is Zero an odd or even number? (Most people require a bit to work this one out. Go ahead -- take your time and puzzle it out, herding your arguments both for and against...)

OK, ready? *Zero is an even number.*

It takes people much longer to work out if Zero is odd or even than, say, 13 or 40. Zero simply doesn't show up on either of our mental lists, as we sing-songed our way through them as kids:

Two, four, six, eight...

Or:

One, three, five, seven...

But why, exactly, is Zero an even number? There are a few proofs and various ways of looking at it. Maybe you defaulted to a sort of positional logic, as I did. Zero is flanked by odd numbers -- one and negative one -- so, it stood to reason that Zero should be an even number. As it turns out, that's one of the tests.

Another is whether it can be divided evenly (pardon the pun) by two, and give a whole number -- one with no fractions. Zero passes this test, too: If you chop Zero in half, you get Zero, which is a whole number without any remainders in tow.

If it makes you feel any better, it took mathematicians a while to agree on Zero's evenness. It's easy to see how this may have been so. After all, philosophers argued, and more than a few mathematicians, too: *How could there be an **odd** nothing... or an **even** one, as far as that goes?*

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It's why zero has historically been adrift in the number pool, tethered here and there, willy nilly, tied up at this dock and that one as fads came and went and tides changed.

Babylonians came up with an initial nudge toward Zero around 1500 BCE, but it wore training wheels: It was a little wobbly as constructs go, and not used alone. It also did not appear at the end of numbers. Back then, you had to rely on context of use to determine if "32" meant "32" or "320."

There were experimentations with some symbols that more-or-less meant Zero, and with plain, blank separations between numbers, too.

Throughout time, just about every country's mathematicians got involved in the act of Zero's creation, and the dances of uncertainty all around it. The earliest naming of the concept may be from a Sanskrit word meaning empty. By the 5th century CE, Hindu-Arabic numerals were introduced, along with a positional number system created by a Persian scientist.

Almost everyone's taken a whack at making Zero along the way: People from India, China, Greece, and Rome have taken swings at it, some while tiptoeing around a philosophical crisis or two, as the ancient Greeks did, wondering how *nothing* could be *something*.

Some of us today still wonder how this is so, and not just as far as *math* goes.

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Numbers can sleep sedately, and seem to have little to do with our lives, then suddenly become vital, essential, crucial, and nearly life-or-death, do-or-die, living-and-breathing things.

Some examples: Ask the Missouri family who selected the "correct" string of numbers that

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awarded them some more numbers -- 294 million dollars and change. Or figuring the number of our tax bite, or the odds of getting a raise or ever being able to retire, or have enough to live...

Numbers can make one ask whether or not the jig is up on December 21st this year, as many people still seem to think is the case, despite NASA's stooping low and providing answers on its web site why it is this is not so: *That much-referenced stone calendar is ending a cycle of counting, not ending ALL counting, forever.*

The end of the long count is just the equivalent of seeing "continued in the next notebook," written on the last page of another.

In any event, life is about the numbers, many will say. And numbers need to lean on zero to make it through the day and make any sense of things, at least so far as we parse them today. If *One* is the loneliest number, as some songs and artists hold, then *Zero* must have to be pretty keenly Zen to not want to stake that very same claim.

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All that we appear to be sure of, as internet memes go, is that one should never attempt to divide by zero, unless one is either Chuck Norris, or under his direct supervision while attempting the feat -- otherwise, *Apocalypse!* (If you require proof this is still so, ask the *internet s* .)

Dr. Math will also tell you the operation of dividing by zero is disallowed, quickly adding that Zero is best confined to an eerie twilight and unspoken limbo, even as it bobs up now and again from the Netherworld to enjoy a double life among us here.

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What started all this Zero-based reflection? Dwelling too much in Realityville, I suppose:

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Wondering how it is possible for *zillionaires* to look at themselves in mirrors or sleep soundly, paying nothing in taxes, and getting refunds besides. Or how it is that corporations bursting with profits and countless taxpayer subsidies, scurry and maneuver to pay that same Zero --even less, if it can be finagled.

I also ran into an excellent piece in *The New York Times*, about the costs to the country and regular taxpayers of these very *taxing* deals companies always make - and how it is we suckers always manage to keep the corporate *d* *anse macabre* in motion, time and again.

There was an OK piece in *USA Today*, too, about all that is staying aloft and refusing to trickle down, and never will. There was also a good piece at the Institute for Policy Studies that tickled the tax topic and the current outcries of *We're in a pickle* -- *fix the debt!*

In most regards, such Johnny-come-lately cries are simply more cover for billionaires and fattened corporations who are itching to bilk the people and treasury again. There are plenty of community pillars who double as thieves, ready to sell the unaware a false bill of goods.

Being ardent corporate-and-wealthy debt-fixers could in fact fix us all, perhaps permanently, as these pirates turn to their old, arcane plans to slash taxes, down to Zero and less. You've probably noticed how it is that pirates' ships always come in, while the rest of us linger on shore, pacing.

You'd think we'd catch on something's fishy. Piranhas, you see, never turn down an opportunity to circle back and keep feeding on the unsuspecting schools of populace fish. Cue the *Jaws* soundtrack. Plug your ears. Close your eyes.

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So: This is some of what has me thinking about Zero and numbers, and their tyranny or fleeting fairness, and of all that's come to pass. Meanwhile, the UK has pledged making more funds available to look into tax avoidance by multinational companies. *What a good idea*. Wonder if it will be allowed to catch on here?

Hallucinating again, I know.

The people making the laws are the people beholden to the people pulling the strings and helping bank lawmakers' campaign chests -- so, don't expect any of those feeder hands to be too sharply bitten. But, hell, Congress -- *can't you at least play at it some to make it look a whole lot more legit?*

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Music got the Zero fever bubbling along, too. You may not like it when I tell you, because songs are pretty sticky -- they'll be with you for days, just as they've been with me:

- Billy Preston's song, *Nothing from Nothing*.
- Jimi Hendrix's song, *The Wind Cries Mary*.
- Jimi again, with *Castles Made of Sand*.

Good luck keeping these from these going round and round inside *you*, now. Probably best not to fight it. Better to let them swirl around and play, first with

Nothing

, and next, with a pair of Hendrix tunes forever joined at the heart -- both trying to capture things that cannot be held -- cries of the wind and sand castles. And what happens as you realize you have let both of them go, and how they slowly fade away.

You know: Like castles made of sand, falling into the sea, *eventually*.

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Zero visited me as well with Alan Watts along, who always gets me thinking. He was an amazing spirit. No one does *Nothing* *quite so well as he does*.

When he does it, it's not Zero -- it's quite something.

Much ado: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Much_Ado_About_Nothing

Pondering Zero: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-20559052>

and: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/0_\(number\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/0_(number))

Missouri numbers: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-20560032>

Jig?: http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/the_jig_is_up

Long count calendar: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mesoamerican_Long_Count_calendar

Maya calendar: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maya_calendar

NASA's take on 2012 end times: <http://www.nasa.gov/topics/earth/features/2012.html>

Which one's loneliest? [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_\(Harry_Nilsson_song\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_(Harry_Nilsson_song))

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Dividing by zero: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Division_by_zero

and: <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/divide-by-zero>

Why division by zero won't work, by the numbers: <http://mathforum.org/dr.math/faq/faq.divideby0.html>

Taxing deals: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/02/us/how-local-taxpayers-bankroll-corporations.html?partner=EXCITE&ei=5043&r=1>

No trickle: <http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2012/12/01/companies-paying-the-least/1735531/>

Fix the Debt: <http://www.ips-dc.org/reports/ceo-campaign-to-fix-the-debt>

UK tackles tax avoidance: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-20573208>

Alan Watts: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_Watts

Nothing from Nothing with Billy P.: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eCUvkKX0vIY>

Castles with Jimi: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9wuBZ9XDjo>

Mary with Jimi: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GiOMn0FhLoU>

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A brief meditation on *Nothing* with Alan Watts: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ssf7P-Sgcrk>

Today's Bonuses:

Spectacular castle art in the sand: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/20542703>

Two films that help supplement and heal reality -- one with laughter, and one with awe:

Alien craziness may help you stay sane: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fv041-dAnqs&:feature=related>

***Mars needs dreamers* :** <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uDWvsdEYSgg>

- and, as an uber-bonus:

Adventures of solo astronaut, Mark Time:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbkVYwS2-b0>