

Introduction

Imagine standing on the banks of the Nile, three thousand years before our time. The sun is just rising from the primordial waters, and for a single breath you feel it: everything is one. The river, the pharaoh, the scarab beetle, your own heart—everything is merely different waves of the same ocean. This feeling has never left humanity. It is the ancient, quiet whisper of holism: The world is not a pile of loosely scattered parts. It is a living, breathing unity in which every particle only gains its meaning through the whole—and the whole only truly comes into being through every single particle.

This book tells the story of this whisper. From the Egyptian priests who recognized in the Nun the undifferentiated unity of all things, through the Indian Upanishads that praised Brahman as the One behind the Many, to the Greek philosophers who shaped Western thought with their hen to pan—“One is All.” We follow the thread through the Christian mysticism of Meister Eckhart, the Romantic deification of nature in Novalis, the ecological insight of indigenous peoples, and the systems theories of the 20th century. Again and again, the same longing: Nothing is separate. Everything belongs together.

And then, in the 20th century, something astonishing happens. The strictest, most sober of all sciences—physics—suddenly begins to speak the same language. Entangled photons that instantly correspond with each other across light-years. An observer who apparently co-determines reality. A universe that can no longer be broken down into isolated objects without losing its meaning. Suddenly, spiritual seekers rejoice: “You see? Quantum physics finally proves what we’ve always known!”

At this very point, this book does not leap for joy. Instead, it pauses and looks closely. With honest curiosity and cool precision, it asks: Is this really a proof? Or are we projecting our deepest longing onto mathematical formulas that actually say something quite different? Where does legitimate fascination end and well-intentioned but dangerous dilution begin? Can science ever replace what religion and mysticism once provided—or does it merely show us how magnificent and, at the same time, how limited our understanding is?

Let us embark on this journey. Without dogmas, without cheap harmony slogans, but also without the cynical reflex of immediately dismissing everything spiritual as esoteric nonsense. We will marvel, doubt, laugh, and sometimes even be startled. Because the question of wholeness is not a harmless intellectual exercise. It is the question of how we actually want to live in this fragile, interconnected, beautiful world.

Welcome to a book that attempts to examine humanity's oldest feeling with the sharpest tools of the present—and perhaps, in the end, to bring something back that is greater than the sum of its chapters. Something that feels like... wholeness.

Holism in religion, spirituality and philosophy

Ancient Egypt

The idea of the wholeness of all being is among the deepest and most fascinating aspects of ancient Egyptian mythology and cosmology (ca. 3000–1000 BC). It revolves around two central principles: the Nun as the primordial unity and Ma'at as the dynamic force that sustains this wholeness in existence.

In the beginning there was only the *Nun* — the boundless, formless, dark primordial ocean. It was neither a sea in the modern sense nor merely water, but a state of pure potentiality in which all opposites (light and darkness, being and non-being, order and chaos) still rested undifferentiated. In this infinite, inert abyss lay the possibility of everything that could ever exist, already contained — and yet none of it had yet become actual. The Nun thus embodied a kind of original wholeness: an undifferentiated unity in which gods, world, time, and space did not yet exist as separate entities. From it arose — depending on the tradition — the creator god (usually Atum or Ra),



The primordial ocean Nun is pure, undifferentiated potentiality. From it, the first distinction emerges in a shadowy form. Ma'at is the unifying principle that holds the emerging world together.

who through self-generation set the first distinction and thereby called the manifested world into being. The Nun, however, always remained present: it surrounded the ordered world like a cosmic ocean and served as a reminder that everything created ultimately originates from it and can return to it. In some texts, this return to the Nun was even regarded as the ultimate fate of the cosmos — an idea that gives the wholeness of all being a cyclical dimension: from unity arises multiplicity, and multiplicity dissolves back into unity.

Yet for the newly created world not to fall back immediately into formlessness, *Ma'at* moved to the center of Egyptian thought. *Ma'at* was both a goddess and an abstract principle — she represented truth, justice, harmony, balance, and cosmic order. She was the force that, emerging from the original unity of the Nun, prevented the multiplicity of being from disintegrating and instead held it in a living equilibrium. *Ma'at* permeated everything: the course of the stars, the annual flooding of the Nile, the succession of the seasons, the behavior of the gods, and the moral life of human beings. Without *Ma'at*, *Isfet* (chaos, injustice, destruction) would gain the upper hand and plunge the world back into the undifferentiated state of the Nun. The wholeness of all being thus manifests in a double movement:

- Originally as a resting, undifferentiated unity in the Nun
- Dynamically as a continually renewed, harmonious wholeness through the working of *Ma'at*

For the ancient Egyptians, the universe was therefore not a random juxtaposition of things, but a unified structure in which every part — whether star, crocodile, pharaoh, or simple farmer — had its place in the great order. Whoever lived according to *Ma'at* (that is, spoke truth, practiced justice, and sought harmony) actively contributed to preserving the wholeness of the cosmos. This was precisely what was tested in the judgment of the dead before the god Osiris: if the heart of the deceased weighed lighter than the feather of *Ma'at*, he was allowed to partake in the eternal order; if it weighed heavier, annihilation threatened — that is, the fall back into the undifferentiated.

In this way, Nun and *Ma'at* together unite two sides of the same wholeness in the ancient Egyptian worldview: the timeless unity before all creation and the living, nurtured unity in created existence. Together, they form the foundation of a cosmology that speaks less of separation than of deep interconnectedness and responsibility for the whole.

Hinduism

In ancient India, beginning around the 2nd millennium BC, concepts of a profound wholeness and unity of all being developed in the Vedas and especially in the later Upanishads (ca. 800–400 BC). These ideas rank among the most influential philosophical and spiritual concepts in human history.

At the center stands the concept of *Brahman*. Brahman is not understood as a personal god, but as the absolute, impersonal, unchanging reality that lies beyond all dualities and all attributes. It is the One without a second — the fundamental reality from which everything arises, in which everything exists, and into which everything returns. Brahman pervades the entire universe without being touched or altered by it. It is simultaneously being (*sat*), consciousness (*cit*), and bliss (*ananda*) — yet not as three separate qualities, but as the single, undivided nature of the Absolute.



“Tat tvam asi – That art thou.” At the center is the boundless, formless unity of Brahman. From it arise the illusory manifestations, which ultimately dissolve completely back into the one essence. Atman, individuality, is almost invisibly connected to the infinite vastness and slowly dissolves.

The individual self, the *Atman*, plays a decisive role here. *Atman* is the innermost essence of every living being — not identical with the body, feelings, thoughts, or the ego, but the pure, eternal consciousness present in every human being. The central insight of the Upanishads is: “*Atman is Brahman.*” This famous formula, often quoted as “*Tat tvam asi — That thou art*” from the Chandogya Upanishad, expresses the radical unity: the individual self and the universal ground of reality are ultimately not two different things, but one and the same.

This realization means that the apparent multiplicity and separateness of the world — humans, animals, plants, stars, gods — is an illusion (*maya*) born of ignorance (*avidya*). In truth, there is no real separation. Everything that exists is a manifestation or appearance of the one Brahman. The seeming multiplicity is comparable to waves on the ocean: the waves appear separate, yet they consist entirely of water and ultimately return to the ocean.

The idea of the wholeness of all being therefore leads to a radical redefinition of the goal of human life. No longer do external rituals or heavenly rewards stand in the foreground (as was still the case in earlier Vedic layers), but rather direct self-knowledge (*atma-vidya*). Whoever, through meditation, reflection, and spiritual discipline, realizes the identity of *Atman* and *Brahman*, sees through the illusion of separateness and attains *moksha* — liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*samsara*). This perspective has shaped Hinduism to this day, especially in the Advaita Vedanta tradition. It represents one of the most consistent non-dualistic philosophies: there is only one single reality, and everything else appears only within this one reality. The world is neither entirely unreal nor a second reality separate from Brahman — it is Brahman itself, perceived in the form of appearance.

Thus, the ancient Indian texts describe a deep, all-encompassing unity that lies beyond all opposites and constitutes the true nature of being.

The Pre-Socratics

In the pre-Socratic philosophy of Greece (6th–5th century BCE), the Western intellectual tradition for the first time saw the endeavor to trace the apparent multiplicity of the world back to a