In the hit comedy Wedding Crashers, the slick motor-mouth Jeremy, played by Vince Vaughn, effectively seduces a young woman by riffing on the “metaphysical awareness” he acquired in a moment of crisis, seeing a friend in danger. (He burnishes it with a reference to “the 19th-century German philosopher Schopenhauer,” which he pronounces “Shoppen-hower.”)

What is the awareness? “That we are all one,” Jeremy croons to the girl, “that separateness is an illusion, that I’m one with everyone.” Before suggesting his cheek might perhaps be one with hers, Jeremy offers a superbly demented catalogue of people with whom he, in particular, is one—among them the Olsen Twins, Natalie Portman, Jay-Z, the guy who wrote Catcher in the Rye, Nat King Cole, Harry Potter (if he existed), Carrot Top, and the whore on the street corner.

This surely ranks as the sole line of dialogue, past or future, to link Jay-Z and Nat Cole; but its comedy runs deeper than a garbage list of pop-cultural clutter. Jeremy may be nuts but he’s no dummy. Indeed, his cynicism neatly dices up that common saw of cheap compassion, the oneness of us all. This “we are all one” speech is just one dart in a quiver full of cheesy lines guaranteed to make wedding-softened lovelies fall for him.

Are we all one? Is there a power of one? What is the meaning of one, anyway? Bryce Courtenay’s novel, The Power of One, implies an individual has the ability to make a difference. There is also the power of being number one, as when the University of Texas football team won the Rose Bowl. (This claim is ubiquitous, everywhere symbolized by the oversized novelty finger with team logo stencilled on foam—the ultimate positional good.)

In a less attractive recent usage, there is the killing power of a single soldier as lauded by a U.S. Army recruitment campaign—conveniently overlooking the essence of all military hierarchy, which is to suppress individual decision in order to exploit individual courage.

One may be (as the Harry Nilsson song goes) the loneliest number you’ll ever do, but it is a happy king of the mathematical world: one half of the binary code bit, the stuff of the universe; the value signifying
certainty in the world of probability theory. Statisticians are familiar with Benford’s Law, which shows that around 30 percent of the numbers in any collection of data—from stock market prices to the heat capacities of chemicals—will begin with the digit 1. Two follows at about 18 per cent, and so on down to nine at about 4.5 per cent. Nobody is quite sure why.

You can see why the metaphysical-oneness line might be effective—if only in the overheated male fantasyland of the movies. It is, after all, something we wish to be true, one of those standard bromides of the age. It is invoked equally as a panacea for racism (beneath the skin, we’re all human!) and a solution to ideological disagreement (beyond the debate, creationists are people too!).

In a romantic context, the oneness thesis is piggybacked to—or maybe even underwrites—the widespread notion that love is a fusion of souls, an overcoming of separateness. Indeed, generalized oneness is widely supposed to transcend every imaginable difference and all manner of conflict, such that, if we only had eyes to see, we would appreciate our essential brother- and sisterhood—only some of which, presumably, would involve later physical oneness.

That is nonsense in both the strict and loose senses. In the loose sense, it is sentimental eyewash, often enough in the service of the current arrangement. As the French critic and philosopher Roland Barthes points out in his essay *The Great Family of Man*, claims for universal humanity are almost invariably conservative in tendency. They ignore history, and so work to leave everything as it is. Barthes calls this ideology of essential sameness “Adamism.”

Here, “we are held back at the surface of an identity, prevented precisely by sentimentality from penetrating into this ulterior zone of human behaviour where historical alienation introduces some ‘differences,’ which we shall here quite simply call ‘injustices.’” The “wisdom” and the “lyricism” of oneness are mere gestures that defuse, via cheap emotion, the truths of difference. French president Jacques Chirac may claim that all French citizens are one, but riots in *les banlieues* give his words the lie.

Even the inescapable fact of death is not shared in this banal great-family sense, despite the frequent allusions by the rich and powerful that they, too, will someday die. Such existential mugging should always remind us of Anatole France’s tart assessment of “equality before the law,” namely that it forbids rich and poor alike to steal firewood or to sleep under bridges.
The oneness of us all is also nonsense in the strict sense, which is to say that it has no truth-value at all, being neither true nor false. This may be one reason it is so often invoked as loose nonsense, since sentiments without truth-value cannot be denied. We cannot be all one without ceasing to be us. If that were so, there would be no us for us all to be one of. To be one would mean there was no non-one, rendering the category meaninglessly wide. The idea that we-are-all-one is, as the 18th-century German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel said, the night in which all cows are black.

We can push the thought of oneness still further. If the concept of “one” means a whole, somehow indivisible or coherent, it must possess limit: One cannot be merely undifferentiated stuff.

But that which has a limit establishes the region beyond itself as not-it. One thus immediately implies, at least, two: that which is one, and everything else. For the Pythagoreans, among others, there could not be one one, there had to be two; and if there were two, there had to be more. Hence, among other things, numbers are revealed as a divine expression of the cosmos. Later, on the basis of similar logic, Hegel could even claim, in apparent violation of the law of non-contradiction, that “A” is equivalent to “not-A” because both necessitate the other.

I agree that this rarely comes up in daily life. A more pressing and practical question is what makes for oneness anywhere at all? A recent dinner-table dispute in my family involved the issue of what counted as “one chocolate.” Did that mean one chunk of confection taken from the passing box, or (my own view) the contents of one miniature paper cup, which sometimes included more than one piece? Like Democritus in the ancient world and Niels Bohr in the modern, we seek the truth of the atom; but when is the piece not the whole? The rival parties both understood the notion of oneness perfectly well; they just didn’t apply it at the same point, meaning that there was, as it were, no longer any such thing as “one chocolate.” Let us call this Burdick’s Paradox, after the brand of chocolates in question.

Most of the time, we have no trouble distinguishing one unit from another, seeing this or that thing as not something else. I take an apple, you take an apple. If there is just one, we cut it in pieces—perhaps applying a neat dinner-table version of distributive justice to do so by having the cutter taking the last piece. Sometimes a unit is a function of a system of exchange, as with one dollar or one metre, and without substance; some-
times it is a token issued from a type, as with a reproduced song or postcard. We nimbly negotiate these everyday ones and manys without difficulty, avoiding both reduction to sameness, on the one hand, and creeping Platonism of master-types, on the other.

But consider an ancient problem once more occupying the attention of many professional philosophers: When does one become many? One grain of sand is not a heap. Neither is two. On the other hand, we all know a heap when we see it. So at what point—with the addition of which new grain—does the non-heap become the heap?

Heaps of sand may not interest you, but many important concepts are also subject to these problems of vagueness between one and many. The idea of one person is one of them. How many limbs or organs can I lose before I cease to be myself? How many brain cells or memories or intellectual capacities? We recognize each other as one pretty reliably, but at the margins—where vagueness rules—things are not so clear. My identity may seem reliably to belong to me, but to what degree is it dependent on your seeing me as me? Not the oneness of everything, but the fragility of one’s personal oneness in the face of everything.

Integrity is a notion found in both ethics and materials science, but it derives a more basic meaning from mathematics. Integer is the name we give to a whole number, something entire and complete; and thus, by metaphorical extension, to something sound or good. One good thing, there (teger being the Latin for “touch”) for the touching. Tangible oneness.

Four centuries into the modern era, we are well aware of the limitations inherent in what political philosophers call “atomic individualism.” Everybody counts for one, in votes and in claims on the state we share; legitimacy begins and ends here. But if we come to view individuals as fundamentally self-interested and separate, at war with their neighbours, alienation and conflict loom. What starts as a great victory for the self declines swiftly into pathology: not deliberation between friends but bargaining among strangers.

The truth is that there are duties, both ethical and civic, that make no sense without a prior commitment to a web of care, which, however tenuously, connects one person to another. We are not alone, because we cannot be who we are in the first place without the others for whom we act, and from whom we seek recognition.

But that doesn’t mean we are all part of one great family. The power of oneness as integrity lies not in us all being one, but in our each being so.
Not later in death, and not under the skin; but now, as we are—and aren’t—the same. Call this recognition “justice,” or anyway its beginning.

Just one person’s view, of course. And don’t get me started on zero.

**NOTES AND DEFINITIONS**

*Wedding Crashers*: a 2005 movie in which two bachelors sneak into wedding receptions in order to meet and seduce young female guests. In trying to show oneness, the character Jeremy offers up a disparate group of people: young actresses the Olsen twins (Mary-Kate and Ashley) and Natalie Portman; rapper Jay-Z; reclusive writer J. D. Salinger, whose adolescent-angst novel *The Catcher in the Rye* was published in 1951; Nat King Cole (1919–1965) singer and jazz pianist; Harry Potter, fictional character; and Carrot Top, a comedian known for his mop of bright red hair. (paras. 1, 2)

*les banlieues*: a French word for outskirts of the city, or the suburbs, where race riots have been taking place. (para. 10)

Pythagoreans: followers of Pythagoras (5th century B.C.E.), Greek philosopher and mathematician. (para. 14)

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831): German philosopher and idealist. (para. 14)

Democritus (460–370 B.C): philosopher who speculated on the atom, and is considered by some the father of modern science. (para. 15)

Niels Bohr (1885–1962): Danish physicist who contributed to our current understanding of atomic structure and quantum mechanics. (para. 15)

Platonism: the philosophy espoused by Plato (424–348 B.C). His theory of forms influenced much of Western thought. (para. 16)

**STRUCTURE AND TECHNIQUE**

Kingwell begins his article with an extended reference to a popular movie. This anecdotal opening draws in the reader to the main topic. The writer establishes not only interest but some common ground so he can segue into a more complex subject.
Another technique is the rhetorical question. In paragraphs 2 and 4, Kingwell begins with a question, to which he provides the answer and explanation. In other paragraphs, the rhetorical question is embedded.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. Kingwell says that the idea of universal humanity ignores history. Discuss his point, giving some examples from history where human beings show an inability to accept fellow human beings as equal.
2. Explain how the law does not treat rich and poor people alike. (para. 11)
3. Discuss Kingwell’s statement: “The truth is there are duties, both ethical and civic, that make no sense without a prior commitment to a web of care, which however tenuously, connects one person to another.”
4. Kingwell destroys a number of myths that we hold about individualism and collectivism. Why do we still cherish these myths?
5. Why do we want to be the same? Why do we want to be different? Is there a happy medium in the reconciliation of these opposites in our personal lives? What about the bigger picture?
6. Discuss the power of numbers in our lives. Why do we ascribe so much meaning to them? Why are we superstitious about some numbers.