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ANESTHESIOLOGY REFLECTIONS FROM THE WOOD LIBRARY-MUSEUM

Romancing the Elements: Ether as Solidly Platonic?



Millennia before five regular convex polyhedra rolled into modern gaming, Plato (*left*) popularized these perfect solids as representing the four classical elements and *Aether* (or Ether) in his masterwork, *Timaeus*. Fascinated by connections between the sensed and unsensed world, Plato rationalized the physical properties of each solid as an idealized representation of a specific element in his theory of matter. The tetrahedron (*red, upper left*) rises to a stabbing point, like the unbearable heat of Fire; the spinnable octahedron (*yellow, lower right*), Air; and the flowing, nearly spherical icosahedron (*purple, lower left*), Water. All three elements are formed from the same elementary triangle. The squarely grounded cube, however, symbolized Earth (*green, upper right*) and is incompatible with Fire, Water, and Air. Encompassing all four classical elements in its vast godly space, Ether, represented by the dodecahedron (*blue, center*), approximated the quintessence of the universe. By the end of the Renaissance, Ether, the grandest Platonic solid, would lend its lofty name to a famously volatile gas that would revolutionize surgery centuries later. (Copyright © the American Society of Anesthesiologists’ Wood Library-Museum of Anesthesiology. www.woodlibrarymuseum.org)

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