

Online Appendix A, Supplement 4

The Limits of Teleological Unity

All philosophical problems are, in some sense, rooted in the one-many problem. The relation between what counts as a “one,” a particular being, and what counts therefore as something “other” to it, rest on the core conception of the relation between one and many.

The most far-reaching consequence of monotheism is its global warping of the conception of oneness. In particular, it ensures the ontological ultimacy of a *teleological* conception of unity. It is important to see that there are other conceptions of what is meant by “one” available to the human mind, but which are foreclosed by the teleological oneness concomitant with the monotheist conception of the “one” God.

To glimpse what is at stake here, we may highlight again the following distinctive features of monotheism:

1) the replacement of the immanence relation with the dichotomous, mutually exclusionary creator/created relation, which leads to the strange idea of an all-inclusive One which is also, and thereby, exclusive. This is what leads to the caricature and villainization of “idolatry” as a betrayal rather than expression of the One, of the ineffable. What monotheism represents is not, as Nancy avers, the conjunction of effability and ineffability, of radical alterity and radical proximity, but rather precisely in the unprecedented dichotomization of absence and presence, of alterity and proximity. This is what Jan Assmann calls “the Mosaic distinction”—i.e., the invention of the idea of *false religion*, located in a maliciously unsympathetic reading of *idolatry*—though as will be seen in the main text, in my view its pernicious absolutization has less to do with Moses than with Plato. The despised religious idol is, in fact, already both the presence of the god and the absence of the god—not at all, as Nancy alleges with shocking monotheistic prejudice, some kind of pure positive presence. The proof of this lies in the simple fact about number. For the issue is not whether the divine sense-making element is present or absent, but whether it is one or many; the one-many problem defines the presence-absence

problem. Put simply, the mode of presence found in idolatry and polytheism is *non-mutually exclusive*. The god is present at once in *this* idol and in *other* idols. This is the logic of expression, of degree, of the non-alterity of alterity and immanence that Nancy mistakenly tries to locate in monotheism. What happens in the monotheistic rejection of idols is rather not that God or sense withdraws from the world, but rather that it is now limited to *one place only*. It has become an exclusive monopoly, rather than a variously expressed presence-as-absence, absence-as-presence. With this, and with this alone, comes into the world the dichotomous notion of presence as the exclusion of absence. The claim that “God never appears in the world” is *itself the appearance of God in the world*, just like any other determinate claim or idol, with the only difference that it is joined to a claim that God appears nowhere *else* in the world! The “nowhere else” is the sole new structural content of the claim. In fact, in a pre-monotheistic setting the concretizations of the always absent One do *not* necessarily distort it, for none of them is *exclusively* claiming to be it: the God is in the statue, but if the statue is destroyed, the God is not destroyed, but just *moves* to somewhere else, or is simply in many places at once, each in a unique way.

2) the One as *A Person*. Not just as “person,” or as “personing,” or better as “multiple personings” or even better still “infinite personings”—which the One/None can also be in the Mahāyāna Buddhas—but as *a person*, a single, individual person, one personality *to the exclusion of other personalities*. In spite of subtle attempts to overcome this problem in some mystical margins of the monotheist traditions, it remains an insurmountable problem to exactly the extent that God remains *in any sense* a person. For indeed, though there is more to personhood as we know it than purposivity and exclusivity, this “more” depends precisely on the fact that personhood is non-ultimate, that personhood is not the ultimate horizon of being: the non-purposive and non-exclusive dimensions of finite personhood depend on *the non-existence of God*. Personhood as activity, as self-recognition, as performativity, as being which questions Being, as selective incorporation of initially external elements, these are all important aspects of Being and plausible candidates for ontological primacy, but unless there is something pre-personal and post-personal, these become impossible. They cannot pertain to personhood if personhood is the ultimate principle at the root and end of all being. God’s personhood thus

becomes not personhood embedded in a prior world of nonpersonhood and alternate-personhoods, which it may in some sense come to incorporate or realize, but one and only one person, or three and only three persons—something in any case that other things and other persons most definitely be conceived as *not* being. More specifically, Nancy speaks of Christianity as the religion of no-religion, i.e., centered on revelation with no content, on the disclosure of disclosure, the opening of openness per se (picking up a motif from Hegel): faith in faith itself, the consummation of sense as the pure sense-ness with no particular sense. But this is unconscionable distortion of the historical record. What we see when we compare Christianity to truly atheist systems—Confucianism, Mahāyāna Buddhism, Daoism—is that *the real issue is not content or no-content, but rather one content versus an infinity of alternate contents*. Again, there is an obvious paradox in the manifestation of no content, if we remember the definition of a “thing” in the relevant sense: a thing is what excludes other things. By this standard, “no-content” is most definitely a *thing*. Indeed, it is the thing of things! For this “no-content” is still a *particular* content, meaning simply that it *excludes* other contents. What makes it a content is simply that it excludes. So even a completely empty gesture of the one who announces, without announcing anything, such as Nancy finds in the contentless figure of Jesus in the Gospels, is still and emphatically a single content as long as it excludes any other content. As we will consider in the online appendix B, a true disclosure of no-content revealing per se is perhaps found in something like the *Lotus Sutra*, where we find the disclosure of contentless manifestation is indeed of a pure place-holder, the name of the Sutra itself, but the implication is explicitly then just the opposite of what we find in the Gospels: not the exclusion of all other contents, of all contents per se, but rather the inclusion of all contents, the notion of the no-content revealing itself *as* any and every content as the full disclosure of the absoluteness of disclosure itself, of openness itself, a true opening to openness. What marks Christianity, and indeed even post-Christian atheism, Occidentality per se, is this *exclusivity*: the mutual exclusivity of being and nothing, of content and contentless, of sense and senselessness, of order and chaos, of meaning and meaninglessness—even, still nowadays, truth and falsehood. What Nancy’s unpacking of God really implies, then, is that, because no content, no finite sense, is sufficient, we posit an anti-sense *as the only sense*. But this anti-sense is actually a “sense” in

precisely the way that sense was initially objectionable: it excludes, it impoverishes, it crowds out all other life. We find God by excluding the idol. We find truth by excluding falsehood. We find goodness by excluding evil. Universality has to be found if not by excluding then at least by unilaterally subordinating the particulars to some *one definite* universal, or to universality per se, making sure to keep the particulars locked into place as *merely* particulars, and meanwhile eliminating any alternate definite forms of universality. If we wanted to be especially mean about it in countering Nancy's claims, adopting his own broad strokes, this would be a closer approximation of what "the West" would then mean: God as cancer cell.

Originally, in Plato, perhaps the idea was just meant as an inspired metaphor: "the" God, in *Timaeus*, as an explanatory first principle. What it meant, though, as we shall explore in detail below, was that "it is good" is a reason that something exists. The real burden of Plato's innovation here is that purpose is causative of whatever exists, and a *single* purpose. This was merely an extension of the Socratic conflation of being and goodness and knowledge: to know the good is to do the good, to do the good is to know the good, and what is produced according to correct knowledge, goodness, is what counts as a true and real instance of a proposed being (i.e., a pious act is produced by knowledge of what piety is, which is the real substance of the virtue of piety). Now this "conflation" of being and goodness can also exist in a truly atheist system, e.g., in Spinoza or in Confucianism or in Daoist radicals of the *Zhuangzi* and its aftermath. But the difference there is which is the dependent and which is independent variable. In these atheisms, things are good *because* they exist. In monotheism, things exist *because* they are good. More importantly, in atheism, there is *more than one kind of goodness*. We will turn to key examples below, e.g., Spinoza's *conatus*: things *are* their own valuing of themselves, their endeavor to continue to exist is their very essence, wanting themselves is what they literally are. They are good (to themselves) because they are themselves. This priority of being over goodness, where goodness is derived from and relative to being, is a shared mark of atheist thinkers, of whatever stripe. At the opposite extreme, the radical Zhuangzist Daoists like Guo Xiang end up making the same claim from the other direction: each thing is its own self-rightness spontaneously affirming itself and thereby becoming itself, becoming itself and thereby affirming itself. This is the difference from monotheism in the one sense that Nancy gets right:

monotheism means monovalence. Once again, the real issue boils down to the one-many problem. Atheist mysticism doesn't deny the ontological dimension of value, or its intrinsicness; but by reversing the direction of dependence, not from goodness to being but from being to goodness, what it denies is the singularity of value, its exclusionary character, its monopolization in one place or one system only. Atheism means multivalence.¹

Because of the transcendence of the creator/created relation, monotheism necessitates what Hegel calls "external" teleology, i.e., teleology per se in its usual meaning of things existing for some purpose other than themselves, the mutual exclusivity of ends and means. As explored in online appendix A, supplement 11, "Europe's Missed Exit," the new type of "internal" teleology Hegel puts forward derives from Kant's breakdown of what a concept is (a rule for unifying particulars which instantiate it) and what a purpose is (a concept with causal power): a self-instantiating unity, a unity that produces what it unifies, a creative whole that generates its own parts. In short, just holism, where the whole makes the parts what they are. In fact this is "beauty"—purposivity without purpose—rather than purpose. We will take this up in our sidebar discussion of Hegel below. But to exactly the extent that Hegel holds to this revamped notion of teleology, dispelling in its name the older notion of teleology which he now can disparage as merely "external," he is an atheist mystic. It is when he backslides from this revised notion of teleology back to a "progressive" ideal of some *specific* telos, to the extent that he does, that he falls back into the monotheist universe.

In sum, what's distinctive about monotheism is not the draining of meaning/sense/divinity out of the world (Nancy's monotheism=atheism trope), but rather the *locating* of the prospective sense/meaning/divinity *elsewhere*—even if it is constitutively elsewhere, structurally always somewhere other than whatever is currently here, always outside our grasp. The creation of another "site" or "realm" of concretized countersense, a kind of inverted mirror image or photographic negative which simply has the effect of making "the world" *bigger*, to include "the two worlds"—the larger world still has meaning "in it," but "over there," divided from us by an unpassable wall. In contrast, for the atheist mystics, when fullness

¹ On this point, see Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, Aphorism 143, on the superiority of polytheism and superstition to monotheism and regulated knowledge.

is denied to the world of experience, it is not concretized elsewhere: the abstract is, is in traditional Chinese systems, simply the “non-existent” or “the formless” as such. Not that the fully constituted form/sense/value is elsewhere, but that whatever value and being are apparent is just the tip of a valueless/value untotizable totality, forms as the tip of an iceberg of formlessness and non-being.

For we can go so far as to say that, from the standpoint of atheist mysticism, what is distinctive about the West, “Occidentality,” is the absolute disjunction between being and non-being (going back to Parmenides—here we can happily adopt Assmann’s acceptance of this modification of his original distinction: not the Mosaic Distinction so much as the Parmenidean Distinction is the real heart of the matter), a faith that persists in spite of the insoluble logical problems it presents. Put another way: it is the extension of dualist notions of mutually exclusive truth and falsehood even to metaphysics and theology and ontology—such that gods either exist or do not, are real or are not—rather than saying that they exist in one way or another, and do not exist in some other sense, or exist to some degree, or exist under some conditions, or exist as aspects of beliefs that they exist, or some other non-bivalent alternative. This means not just the division between literality and metaphor, or truth and opinion, but the extension of literalness to ontology. In atheist Daoisms and post-Daoisms, and their accidental cousins across the world and across the ages, being and nothing² are always mutually generating if not both aspects of a Middle *tertium quid*, namely the ability itself to be or not be—and all things which are so much as adduced as possible gods are ipso facto gods *in some sense*.³ Even at their ugliest, what we get

² If, circularly, it is objected that these should not be the terms used for the translation of Chinese terms like *you* 有 and *wu* 無 precisely because they are not, like “real” being and nothing, mutually exclusive and absolutely disjunctive—i.e., because they do not observe the Parmenidean distinction which is regarded as the definition of being and nothing proper, we can make just the same point simply by saying that these terms, whatever they may translate to (e.g., “presence” and “absence” or “having” and “lacking” or “formed and formless,” and so on), the two terms defining the most extreme opposition in the ontological spectrum are here not dichotomous.

³ Such atheisms are thus at their worst an elite attitude of tolerance and condescension, elimination from some but not all contexts, rather than of militant expurgation. I have in mind Confucian thinkers like Xunzi, or Neo-Confucian thinkers like Cheng Yi. Not “those gods are false, this one God alone is true,” nor “those gods are false, no Gods are true, only principles are true,” but rather “those gods are misunderstood by those people—what they call gods, we call culture, or principles, but each of these names has its own validity if kept to its proper sphere of use.” This does not mean they do not insist on a hierarchy between these various views, or possibly even the elimination of some practices from official recognition or tolerance from the State. For example, Xunzi tells us that to view the rituals as culture is “auspicious,” while to view it as miraculously efficacious is “inauspicious.” But in making this distinction, he is clearly presupposing an elitist class distinction: it would be bad for rulers to really believe the rituals make it

there is hierarchy rather than extermination, and with that, in the relatively less conservative and state-friendly thinkers among them, the proliferation of multiple simultaneous incompatible hierarchies, multiple centers, differentiated by hierarchical degrees of validity or importance but not by any all-or-nothing either/or. What we find in mystical atheism is a tendency toward either limited or expansive validity of multiple perspectives, with each perspective taking into account and allowing for the validity of the other, which one-ups the others by peripheralizing rather than by annihilating, as we find in the monotheist regime of a single exclusive truth which demands that all other views be silenced. For here all truths are merely negotiable names for something which is itself beyond any single name, since there is no giant God mind that named them with an essence before they existed, or that rejects all other names as not its own name, a name which may be known to no one but Itself, but which is nonetheless known, and nonetheless a name—in precisely the sense that it rejects other names, other forms, other identities as definitely *not* itself.⁴ This centerless sive omniscient intersubsumption is the kind of unity we get in the absence of global teleology, in the absence of *Noûs as Arché*. Everything connects to everything else, everything subsumes everything else, everything leads to and from everything else: such is the infinity of unities that converge at every finite locus, an inclusive infinity where subsumed and subsume, ends and means, are inseparable only because they are constantly swapping places. The other kind of alleged infinity, an infinity that is claimed to somehow nonetheless *exclude*, an *exclusive* unity made the principle of all existence—how did such a concept ever come to be, and what are its entailments? This is the question we take up in Chapter 1 of our main text.

rain, and good for the state for them to understand it as purely cultural. But this does not seem to involve either the abolition of the ritual *or the requirement for the common people to share the view of the rituals as non-miraculous*. On the contrary, arguably Xunzi seems quite comfortable with a kind of “pious fraud” model: what is best is to keep the rituals, and have the elite know they are merely cultural while having the common people believe they are miraculous.

⁴The contrasts stands also with post-monotheist atheists (e.g. the existentialist, or the atheist social utopian) who acknowledge that essence proceeds essence but still think enforcing a single-essence in whatever exists, through the application of will and control, through projects and planning, through means and ends, through purposive activity, is the sole value of existence. Purposive activity is a value—but it is not the sole value. It is what defines all value—but from that it does not follow that it grounds *a single system* of value. The valorization of a single system, a single identity, whether for ourselves or for the world, is monotheism in atheist clothing—even if that system and that identity are an “atheist” system and an “atheist” identity.