

Online Appendix A, Supplement 6 The Atheist Matrix of Polytheism

A child looks around her bedroom and sees faces everywhere. The two knobs of the dresser are its eyes, the edge of the bottom drawer is its smile. That friendly dresser shares in her daily experiences, is pleased along with her or angry when neglected. Even a towel on the chair, with no discernible facial contours, might be a soul, pleased when folded nicely and respected, angry when tossed on the floor. The stuffed animals are of course seamlessly adopted as companions.

A computer programs the behavior of a chess-playing humanoid robot: for brief moments we forget it is a robot and see a “person” there.

When do we see person, when do we cease to see person? When we see past the thing we are interacting with, to another cause “further back” than its own alleged intentions, we cease to see it as a person. Now we might see another person back there pulling the strings—the computer programmer, for example. Then we have made the robot a *sign* of another personality, an absent personality.

The little girl might look around her room and see the invisible hand of her mother who bought her the towel and the dresser and put them there for her, out of love. These are now symbols of love, the represented person rather than direct presence of the person.

The difference between these two feelings of personality is difference between the monotheist and the polytheist gods. The monotheist God is a personality who is present in all things because we see the traces of his intentions there: he is setting up signs for us to read, by which we come to know him and feel him, and are reminded that he is watching us. He does not *require* any particular physical manifestation, any body. That is to say, he is entirely separable from any material form he uses to express his personality, and he disposes these material bodies at will: he *made* them, he *controls* them, and he can *leave* them. They do not impinge on or obstruct him. God does not sneeze, God does not fart.

The polytheist gods, as the spirits inhabiting and animating particular natural phenomena or particular spheres of activity, are initially more like the towel-god, or the dresser god: the god's relation to that phenomenon or activity is like our presence in the world, like our own relation to our body finding its place within a pre-existing world. The god has some responsibility for causing things to happen in this body and this world, but is also beholden to this body and this world. The god can partially control the body but cannot totally control it, can be affected by it in ways it does not choose. The god expresses itself through and in this body, but in such a way that, as with us and our own faces and bodies, it presents itself to the naïve eye as susceptible to two opposite but equally plausible explanations: it might be a body that an ethereal spirit (priorly within a pre-existing spirit world—which is also a world of constraining conditions, populated with other ethereal spirits and forces) has grown or formed to act and express itself in this world; but it is equally possible to interpret it the other way around, viewing our souls as mere expressions of our body and the world that conditions it, simply the emergent totality of the style of life achieved by our body viewed as a whole. This undecidability between mind causing body or body causing mind is intrinsic to such a face in a world, as it is for ourselves. But even if we view the spirit as pre-existing its material body, it has not created itself, and had a surrounding spirit-world to contend with even before its manifestation here: even there, it faced some kind of a world, and could not be in total control.

Like ourselves, the god cannot easily leave this body at will. Though in the absence of any evidence, purely on the basis of its phenomenological presence, it is not totally unimaginable that under special circumstances—dreams, reincarnations, psychic powers—it might somehow be separable from the body it inhabits, it is normally stuck to this particular body or activity, some particular uncontrolled dimension, and if the body is harmed, the god suffers, and may become angry. Desecration of a shrine the god inhabits, insult to the priests of that god, botching of the rites by which that god is revered and nourished, misuse of an art in which that god exerts his power—these are not only offences against the god's honor, but actual practical problems and inconveniences to that god. Even the question of honor, in this context, points to the vulnerability of the god, for it affects the god's role in relation to the other gods, the god's place in the divine hierarchy, the respect due to this god over against other gods, and thereby also

affects the god's power of action. The river god is responsive to how you treat the river because he is to some degree at the mercy of the state of the river, his own body, as the towel god is at the mercy of how you treat the towel. He is a personality, but if the towel is dirtied or torn his ability to act, to express that personality, is impaired. He cannot leave the towel quite at liberty, and he does not have total control over the towel: that's why he needs your cooperation. You and he are more or less in the same ontological boat: tied to a body and a world that are not entirely in your control, bodies that need maintenance and that might embarrass or betray you, a face facing a world. The towel god may be able to leave the towel in some extraordinary circumstances, but intrinsic to this conception is the idea that this will require great effort, and that he will need elsewhere to find some other, and also vulnerable, body.

In this sense, the personalities of those polytheist deities that start out as nature spirits are beholden to some particular kind of body—i.e., a non-personality, something uncontrolled by themselves which is not a tool entirely of their own making, not something they entirely control, not created *ex nihilo* solely for their use, having a recalcitrant embedded reality of its own. The inseparability of the personal and the impersonal here is maintained even when the personalities, the animistic spirits, are thought of as really involved in the causality of all events: the causality of an event may be due to their deeds, but not all of the prior conditions that enable these deeds are within the reach of the personal intentions.

Polytheist gods of greater power, of course, begin to have more liberties. In many cases, they can shapeshift, assuming alternate forms, and in the case of the most powerful among them, the range of bodies they can assume, at least in appearance, is nearly unlimited. But this greater range of transformations is really a manifestation of the greater power that has accrued to both the body and spirit of the original embodiment. In general, gods of those physical phenomena that are themselves most capable of transformation are those that can transform into a wide variety of forms even beyond their original one. Just as the physical phenomena of thunder and the sea are more mercurial and shapeshifting than mountains are, the spirits of the thunder and of the sea in their divinized forms are generally able to take on a greater number of bodily forms than the spirits of the mountains. Qua personal, they are never entirely without some form or other, and even their transformative ability is a function of their embeddedness in some form. A

god has either one specific kind of body or one primary body which is itself capable of transform into many bodies; it never simply has no body or a multitude of bodies. In these cases we approach the omnideterminability of indetermination, the omniformativity of formlessness, in a certain way, but not through an abstract formlessness, but through the intrinsic multiformality of any given form, manifested in some forms more than others, but minimally applicable to any form qua form, inasmuch as no form is completely static. Nor does even the greatest power of this kind ever completely free the god of the beholdenness to the givenness of bodily forms and conditions beyond their own control. In one sense, it is the other spirits that limit the control of any given spirit: there too we have an analogue of sneezing or farting, even when these are not literally invoked: things happen to them which are not in the control of their single-narrative single-purposed spirit. Their powers are unequal to others, but never amount to complete control. Even when Zeus transforms into an animal for the purpose of seduction or rape, the prime determinant of the transformations is something not in the deity's own control; he is required to accommodate his form to fit the mechanics of the body he wishes to ravish. Or, at the other extreme, we have the Buddha of the *Lotus Sutra*, engaged in another form of seduction (i.e., *upāya*), with his limitless array of transformation bodies and “separated embodiments” (*fenshen* 分身 in Kumārajīva's Chinese), which he can inhabit and abandon limitlessly; in this case, the beyond-his-control aspect with that must be contended with is again not his own body or even a body to be carnally conjoined with, but the desires, attachments and sufferings of the infinitely diverse sentient beings, none of whom he has created or controls, to whom he is responding or with which he must find a way to liberate. Though equipped with an adamantine eternal body identical with ultimate reality (*Dharmakāya*), and an invulnerable body of bliss (*Samboghakāya*), and even a ceaseless series of physical human bodies formed in response to the soteriological needs of sentient beings (*Nirmānakāya*), all of which display pain and decay only for the sake of interacting with those beings, the Buddha in this kind of Mahāyāna system is still never the disembodied or singly-embodied unilateral creator and controller we find in monotheism. Instead, he remains eternally beholden and responsive to an otherness beyond his control, to a conditionality with which he must deal. His absoluteness lies not in an absoluteness of *control*, but elsewhere, indeed in a certain way in just the contrary. (For a fuller discussion,

see online appendix B, World Without Anaxagoras, “The Lotus Sutra: Monotheism Buddhified, i.e., Destroyed.”)

There is of course a specific theoretical agenda behind such depictions of Mahāyāna buddhas and bodhisattvas: they are meant to convey a way of bringing together the indeterminate and the determinate, formless and the formed, the infinite and the finite—which in this case means also the purposeless and the purposive, the impersonal and the personal. The staunch atheism of this system of thought means that these are not creator deities in any case, for it is the primacy of the impersonal here that enables both the union with every personality and the illimitable multiplicity of these personalities. The invulnerability attributed to these bodies is abundantly stressed here, but the theoretical grounding for this claim lies not in a creative personal purpose but in non-self and emptiness, which are expressed precisely in the transformative capacity of these personal beings: their invulnerability is a way of indicating their ability to transform endlessly without harm, because they have no self to lose in any transformation.

Strictly speaking, this Buddhist case is not a polytheism, because strictly speaking the buddhas and bodhisattvas are not gods; in Buddhism, it is the devas who are gods properly speaking, and a different sort of logic applies to them. But religious history also shows us other theoretically motivated ways of symbolizing the union of finite and infinite, the determinate and the indeterminate, within properly theistic systems, both polytheistic and monotheistic. The differences in each case are instructive. The heavily narratized and theorized gods found within sophisticated polytheist theologies, for example in various non-monotheistic Hindu schools, may differ significantly from the Greek gods, the Mahāyāna buddhas and bodhisattvas, and the animistic nature gods of various regions, in each case differing in a different way. But what they have in common is the presence of a background entity beyond all the gods, something non-personal and non-purposive from which the personal gods derive and in which have their being. In these non-monotheistic versions of Hinduism, the source and ultimate core of existence is something other than a willful mind purposely creating gods and worlds ex nihilo. Even where this ultimate reality is determined as *Sat-Chit-Ānanda* (Being-Consciousness-Bliss), the consciousness in question is emphatically not *Noûs*, not purposeful problem-solving intelligence,

but rather awareness more broadly construed, the allowing and enabling of all conscious events. Some of the more exalted among these personal gods and their avatars in this system may be supremely powerful, and have no vulnerability to harm or loss of control of the kind we see with some of the other polytheistic gods. But they remain permeated and surrounded and undergirded by something non-personal, non-controlling, non-purposeful. Here we have an alternate possibility for a kind of interaction which, while in many ways profoundly unequal, preserves the equality at what we are here trying to pinpoint as the most fundamental and significant level: it does preserve the non-ultimacy of personality on both sides of the personal relationship, such that each personality involved is a living embodiment of a deeper freedom from all purpose, pointing to what is beyond all personality and purpose.

True purposelessness and formlessness is crucial to this multiformality and transformativeness in both the Buddhist and the non-monotheistic Hindu cases, and this is what lies at the base of such visions of embodiments which are nonetheless invulnerable. The invulnerability attributed in both cases is rooted in the transcendence of all determinations and all forms, either as emptiness or as impersonal and purposeless being itself—for what has no specific form or determination cannot be harmed by the damage done to any particular form, and what has no purpose cannot be harmed by the failure of any particular purpose. Above and behind both all these gods and all these transformation bodies, at the source of their own being, since there is no creator God in this way of thinking, we have yet another impersonality always at the root of all this personality. This remains in close continuity with the other sorts of polytheism; for it is possible to see the towel not as a god and also not as a symbol of mom's love, but rather as having landed there by purposeless play. or by emptiness, or by chance. Indeed, even the materialist, like the Spinozist, like the Buddhist, sees the no-personality behind the personality manifest in the chess robot or the dresser or the towel, but also even behind the computer programmer's personality, behind mom's personality. Where there are many gods but no sole creator god, there is a godlessness surrounding and underlying all the gods, manifest both in the background behind each personality and in the very multiplicity of personalities. The point is that in all these cases we feel ourselves as an *attempt* at a personality always surrounded, embedded, negotiating a relation with a non-personal other which *no one* can entirely control and

no one can entirely dispense with, but which can be used as a tool only in the way that a sailor uses the wind and the ocean as a tool: temporarily, if we're lucky, we can harness it toward our temporary and ever-changing ends. We can have personal relations with other beings—gods, spirits, humans—who are basically in the same ontological boat. The invulnerable beings in such a system are those who have embraced and embodied to a maximal degree this indeterminate formlessness at the core of any temporary form they may presently be inhabiting—and this formlessness subtending each of our forms is precisely the medium in which our relationship to one another, the passage from one form to another, is made possible.

The monotheist case is different. Love may exist between such persons chained to bodies that sneeze and laugh and get sick and die, and perhaps even between such beings and those whose bodies are made invulnerable by identifying with what is unharmed by any change of form or any bodily loss of control: the uncontrolled, the purposeless, the formless. But what sort of personal relation exists between one person who sneezes and one person whose inability to sneeze is rooted not in formlessness qua purposelessness noncontrol, but rather in formlessness in the radically constrained form of uberpurposive ubercontrol (i.e., absolutely free will)? The monotheist God, living vigilant purposive *Noûs*, would seem to be the worst of both worlds: not really a person (i.e., someone who must contend with bodily conditions beyond his control, like the towel god or the river god) but still a controller, a purpose-haver, a tool-maker who stands above and can separate himself from, and discard, his tools--one who, like the invulnerable bodhisattvas and avatars, has the ability to purposefully assume any form at will, but unlike them does so not through a relation to formlessness qua purposelessness beyond any control, but rather through a formlessness that has been thoroughly assimilated only to freedom of the will, i.e., where the idea of control itself has been made ontologically ultimate? The monotheist idea tries to combine the personal love we might have with our national gods and our personal ancestral spirits and our household genius with the idea of the creator of the universe, with *Noûs* as *Arché*, which is the opposite of a person if a person is understood to be necessarily always a sneezer and a farter.

It was perhaps to address this wild contradiction in the idea of divine love in the monotheist context that the incarnation of Christ was devised: God was given some vulnerability,

“became” flesh, could get hurt. This is a different kind of attempt to join finite and infinite, form and formlessness, but in this case without sacrificing the monotheist premise. We can see it as a reverse of how this is done in the case of the Dharmic religions: there, we have invulnerability rooted in selfless purposelessness, whereas here, we have vulnerability rooted in omnipotent purpose, in ultimate selfhood. But as long as the idea of a monotheistic creator God, of *Noûs* as *Arché*, of a single mind that is the sole cause and ultimate controller of all that exists, was the premise for this conception, it not only doesn’t solve this problem, but actually makes it a thousand times worse: mind and purpose and judgment become the ultimate end, while body becomes its manufactured tool, the means created for and used to attain a single preconceived purpose. The inadvertent, the purposeless, the vulnerable, the frayed-edged, the bleeding and weeping body, which accepts everything, even what contravenes the mind’s purpose, now becomes thoroughly a tool in the hands of the purposive mind, a means to an end, completely subordinated to consciousness and purpose. The non-deliberate is totally colonized: used as a lure, a tactic, a temporary opposite, but justified by its service to, created by and for the sake of the glory of, leading from and leading to the purpose, the mind of God. The formless and uncontrolled is now permitted, but only temporarily, as a stop on the way to total victory, as way of incorporating and subordinating every last trace of purposelessness and corporeality in all its heedless uncontrollable belching exuberant excessive unowned glory. But to inhabit a body is for consciousness to inhabit something that exceeds its own purposes, that is impervious to purpose or saturated by and embedded in purposelessness, If we are unable to think of anything outside of purpose, it must at least belong to some other alien purpose (God’s purpose or nature’s own intrinsic purposes). In the case of Christ as Logos become Flesh, the *Noûs* involved in the *creation of the universe* is incarnate in a human. Though he has a human body and even a human nature and a human mind as well, insofar as he is the Logos, he is also supposed to be the very mind that created that body, and all other bodies. The mind-nonmind relationship, when it is the *divine* mind, is the relation of creator to created--and the same is true in this case of the divine-mind/human-mind relationship within the hypostatic personality of Christ. This fundamentally changes the mind-body relation of finite beings at its most fundamental point: Christ’s body, far from being the underminer of that incarnated mind’s purposes, the limits of its control, the place

where the very concept of control is interrogated and ironized, is precisely in the most radical possible total control of precisely his own divine mind, the Logos, subordinated completely to its own purposes, since this divine mind is the mind that actually created ex nihilo that human mind and body. God gets a body, but now even its bodiliness per se becomes a tool of mind, indeed even a creation of the very mind that is inhabiting it, which turns out to be the one creator mind, *Noûs* as *Arché* itself. Even if we think of Christ's human nature as subject to the "suffering," the "passion," the non-control, of his body, such that he must say, "Not my Will (the human will) but Thine (the Father's, and presumably also the Son's own divine nature's will, even if that could *per impossibile* differ in any way from thej Father's will) be done," he is at best in the same position of all other Compensatory Theists, for whom genuine non-control is also completely impossible: it's either myself in control, or God in control, or the devil in control, or someone *else*. Nothing happens that is not in control of someone or other. Purposelessness is allowed, but only as a means to an end: even purposelessness *as such* now serves a purpose. Such purposelessness is really just another form of purpose. The last locus for the manifestation of cross-purpose and anti-purpose and non-control has been colonized and subjugated. Now nothing can escape. Again we have the worst of all worlds: not the bodilessness which either grounds or transforms into all bodies, and not particular bodies which can transform into other bodies, but rather a bodilessness that can only transform into *a single body*. Control now dominates everything: the bodilessness is no longer a springboard of infinite not-completely-controlled bodies, but is rather limited to being a particular entity, just like a wholly controlled body created for a purpose would be. The body, in turn, becomes just another kind of eschewal of the uncontrollability of body: a body wholly subordinated to a single purposivity.