

The Sphere with Many Faces

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ABSTRACT

Though there are powerful arguments for a unifying, 'monotheistic,' philosophy, we must in practice acknowledge that we have no grand unified theory, in cosmology, ethics, politics or religion. We have no idea what the One might be, and many warnings against presuming that we do. Pluralism has political roots, and psychological aspects: better that there are many authorities both in the state and in the human soul. It is even possible that there are many powers, deserving a little the title 'gods,' in a macrocosmic reality: the very attempt to avoid the argument from 'fine tuning,' for example, so multiplies the number of real alternate worlds as to make it almost certain that there are such gods, who might very well have a say in our cosmology, our history and our very selves.

UNITY AND DIVERSITY

There are powerful arguments for a unifying philosophy. Any single thing at war with itself – whether a natural body, a choir, a kingdom – will soon cease to be at all: 'for what would anything be if it were not one?'¹ The very notion and aim of science is founded on the conviction that all things have a common origin and obey a common law, and that a contradictory theory of the world cannot in reason be true, even if we cannot, at the moment, fully reconcile two or more well-founded and successful sub-theories (quantum mechanics and the general theory of relativity, for example). In matters ethical all rationalists must agree that rights and duties cannot conflict: no-one can have a right to act against the rights of others, nor a duty to do what they also have a duty *not* to do. Even in matters political it used to be argued that there can in the end be only one authority over all: all but one supposed authority must either be subordinate or in rebellion. All these unitary pleas themselves unite in mainstream monotheistic theology: there can only be *one* God as origin and end of all things, only one that has the power to rule all

1. Plotinus, *Ennead* VI.9 [9].1, 3.

lesser powers, and only one with a right to absolute obedience (on pain of total destruction). 'The bees have one king; the flocks one leader; among the herds there is one ruler. Canst thou believe that in heaven there is a division of the supreme power, and that the whole authority of that true and divine empire is sundered, when it is manifest that God, the Parent of all, has neither beginning nor end?'²

These arguments may well be sound. But it is also possible to recognize both that – in practice – we do not ourselves rely on any purported unifying theory, and that there are also more abstract arguments for a pluralistic account of human psychology, politics and ethics, and also of cosmology, theology and particular ontology. Even if there is only one World, obedient to a single coherent law and composed of homogenous stuff, we cannot reasonably suppose that our immediate world reveals that law so clearly and convincingly as to rule out the existence of *other* worlds that look, and go on looking, wildly different. Even if there is only Right Way, it does not follow that we can specify that Way in any detail: every creature, every human person, lives a life that makes it impossible for that person, that creature, to do many other things which are also entirely legitimate. Even if we yearn for a unitary World State (or still more fantastically for a single Cosmic Monarch) we must at present deal with very many equally authoritative powers (even if we would rather deny their *ethical* authority). Even if each creature, each human person, is counted as a single individual, it is always also a composite of many distinct parts, and has many very various ideals and goals not easily (or at all) prioritized or amalgamated. Even if there is only, in the end and the beginning, One God containing and constraining all things, here and now there are many ways of life and being, many ideals and many independent-seeming powers:

2. Minucius Felix (dd.c250 AD), *Octavius* ch.18, trans. Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: the writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325: Volume IV Fathers of the Third Century* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996 [1885]): <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/octavius.html> (accessed 1st March 2016). See also *Matthew* 12.25: 'Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand.'

Even if we retain any sense of a divine presence in the world, we have to admit that it manifests itself in innumerable various, apparently clashing and conflicting, often inscrutably odd and terrifying ways. Divine unity, not divine plurality, requires an effort of reflection and faith to attain it; and when attained, it does not necessarily exclude plurality.³

Many Stoics expected that there would be a time, indefinitely repeated over aeons, when there were no longer any boundaries, any differences, any distinct identities, and God would be All in All. But here and now (and perhaps forever) there are distinct identities, and ways of life at war. In the Empedoclean account of Love and War, it is *Love* that will draw everything in the end together, and *War* that creates distinct identities.⁴ Sentimentalists may suppose that Empedocles therefore valued ‘Love,’ but what is that – in this context – but the lust to consume all others?⁵ Being gathered up into an Overmind, as Robert Sheckley observes in his satirical commentary on earlier science fantasies, is just like dying, though it sounds much nicer.⁶ Unlimited War may also be destructive, reducing everything to Epicurean atomies that cannot be further split (if such atomies are possible). Both Love and War, it seems, may end in the undifferentiated, whether we call it Fire (if Love has united all things in one God) or Darkness (if War has split everything down to indistinguishable atomies in unending conflict). This world here, our lives and livelihoods, depend on there being many distinct, but mutually dependent, entities, and at least two principles or powers at work to sustain this welcome variety.

It follows that despite any strength there may be in monotheistic theory our lives here now are subject to a plurality of laws and purposes, none of which are clearly dominant forever. It is folly to follow *one* goal, cultivate *one* habit of mind and practice, or expect *one* universal law to explain just everything. Even those who are

3. A.H. Armstrong, ‘Some advantages of polytheism’: *Dionysius* 5 (1981): 181–8; 184.

4. See also Heraclitus, DK 22B53 ‘War is father of all and king of all’ (from Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 9. 9. 4. 4–7 Marcovich); Robin Waterfield *The First Philosophers: the Presocratics and Sophists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 40 (F23).

5. See Peter Kingsley, *Reality* (Inverness, CA: Golden Sufi Centre, 2003): 416, 588.

6. Robert Sheckley, *Dimension of Miracles* (London: Gollancz, 1985 [1968]); see my ‘Science Fiction and Religion’: *Blackwell Companion to Science Fiction*, David Seed ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005): 95–110.

most firmly and rationally ‘monotheistic’ should recognize that any proffered image of the God will only be an idol. ‘The divine word at the beginning forbids that the Divine be likened to any of the things known by men, since every concept which comes from some comprehensible image by an approximate understanding and by guessing at the divine nature constitutes an idol of God and does not proclaim God.’⁷ Even the most rational of scientists should acknowledge that even the best current theory is not a *final* theory, nor likely to cover *all* cases. Even those who look forward to establishing a single Global Authority must recognize that there will always – or at least as long as our descendants are still human - be very many nations, sects, professions and personal entanglements that each serve a separate vision.

THE POLITICAL ROOT OF PLURALISM

As I have already remarked, after Minucius, there is a political dimension here. It can hardly be a question, so his Christian speaker argues:

whether the celestial kingdom is governed by the power of one or by the rule of many; and this matter itself does not involve much trouble in opening out, to one who considers earthly empires, for which the examples certainly are taken from heaven. When at any time was there an alliance in royal authority which either began with good faith or ceased without bloodshed? I pass over the Persians who gathered the augury for their chieftainship from the neighing of horses; and I do not quote that absolutely dead fable of the Theban brothers. The story about the twins (Romulus and Remus), in respect of the dominion of shepherds, and of a cottage, is very well known. The wars of the son-in-law and the father-in-law [that is, Pompey and Julius Caesar] were scattered over the whole world; and the fortune of so great an empire could not receive two rulers.’

What we imagine of Heaven is founded in – and also influences – what we see of Earth, and we readily find the template of earthly rule in the courts of heaven (or vice versa).

What then shall we say when a merely *monarchical* or autocratic rule is no longer considered either fair or safe? In times past we could suppose that monarchs were the sole guarantors of peace within the region that they governed, and that war between

7. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe & Everett Ferguson (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1978): 81 (2.166).

competing nations could be resolved only by the clear submission of one party. Nowadays we mostly prefer – that is to say, the more articulate theorists and agents of the modern ‘West’ prefer – that there should be a ‘loyal opposition’ to any ruling party, ready to critique the ruling policies and ready also to replace them with well-imagined alternatives. We may also prefer that even an unquestioned monarch not be responsible for every aspect of our lives: there should be many, more or less independent, agencies, united not by obedience to one master but by a network of incidental obligations and contrivances. ‘Command Economies’ require a level of power and information that we simply cannot manage, and that we would mostly resent in any case. Better that there be many little powers, with many careful and carefully bounded treaties. The immense *smugness* with which one leading economist, for example, rejected any suggestion that such networks could do as well as the great socialist states, large corporations and the US Department of Defense,⁸ now seems merely quaint. The idea that world peace and prosperity will be best assured by the creation of a single global authority rather than – again – a network of reciprocal, relatively local, agreements and accommodations of the sort imagined by Immanuel Kant,⁹ seems both impractical and dystopian.

Such agreements and accommodations are the stuff of ‘politics’ as we now understand the term. David Brooks, writing with particular reference to the troubles of the US Republican Party in 2016, but with a much wider relevance:

We live in a big, diverse society. There are essentially two ways to maintain order and get things done in such a society – politics or some form of dictatorship. Either through compromise or brute force. Our founding fathers [that is, of the United States of America] chose politics. Politics is an activity in which you recognize the simultaneous existence of different groups, interests and opinions.

8. Kenneth E. Boulding, *Journal of Business* 48 (1975): 111–112 reviewing Frederick C. Thayer *An End to Hierarchy, an End to Competition: administration in the post-affluent world* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1973): ‘We must send Mr Thayer back to his waterbed, with or without a sensuous companion, to think again.’

9. ‘Perpetual Peace’ [1795]: *Kant’s Political Writings*, tr. H.B. Nisbet, ed. H. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970): the second ‘definitive article,’ for example, is that ‘the Law of Nations Shall be Founded on a Federation of Free States.’ I discussed the option of GEA (‘Global Ecological Authority’) as a Pharaonic solution to global problems in my Scott-Holland lectures, *How to Think about the Earth: models of environmental theology* (London, Mowbrays, 1993): 49–50, 108–9, 153–4.

You try to find some way to balance or reconcile or compromise those interests, or at least a majority of them. You follow a set of rules, enshrined in a constitution or in custom, to help you reach these compromises in a way everybody considers legitimate. The downside of politics is that people never really get everything they want. It's messy, limited and no issue is ever really settled. Politics is a muddled activity in which people have to recognize restraints and settle for less than they want. Disappointment is normal. But that's sort of the beauty of politics, too. It involves an endless conversation in which we learn about other people and see things from their vantage point and try to balance their needs against our own. Plus, it's better than the alternative: rule by some authoritarian tyrant who tries to govern by clobbering everyone in his way.¹⁰

The negotiations, if all goes well, are conducted under a roughly agreed set of rules and acceptable conventions which are to be defended by all reasonable parties. Those same rules may once have been understood as validated by the will of the One God overall, who allows His creatures and subordinates lives and liberties of their own, on the sole condition that they honour His authority. This, according to Dio Chrysostom, was the significance of Pheidias' famous statue of Olympian Zeus:

His sovereignty and kingship are intended to be shown by the strength in the image and its grandeur; his fatherhood and his solicitude by its gentleness and kindliness; the 'Protector of Cities' and 'Upholder of the Law' by its majesty and severity; the kinship between gods and men, I presume, by the mere similarity in shape, being already in use as a symbol; the 'God of Friends, Suppliants, Strangers, Refugees,' and all such qualities in short, by the benevolence and gentleness and goodness appearing in his countenance. The 'God of Wealth' and the 'Giver of Increase' are represented by the simplicity and grandeur shown by the figure, for the god does in very truth seem like one who is giving and bestowing blessings.¹¹

In other ages – and even in Chrysostom's own – the image of an Emperor (whether or not it much resembled the actual human lord) might serve a similar function: someone or something above all factional disputes, the guardian alike of equity and hospitality. Our own age and nation may lack any such significant image

10. David Brooks, 'The Governing Cancer of Our Time': *New York Times*, 26th February 2016: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/26/opinion/the-governing-cancer-of-our-time.html>.

11. Dio Chrysostom, 'Man's First Conception of God' (97 AD): *Discourses*, trans. J.H. Cohoon (London: Loeb Classical Library, Heinemann, 1939), vol.2, 79–81 (12.77).

(though some monarchs have done their best to provide it), and therefore be compelled to rely instead on reverence for the very institution of a squabbling Parliament, never wholly united under a single uncompromised idea. The danger – as Plato saw – is that such a squabbling horde may at last fall victim to one more powerful impulse, policy or person. As Brooks suggests, those opposed to the messy business of ‘politics’ may forget that there are other people, or that they might have some legitimate notions:

They delegitimize compromise and deal-making. They’re willing to trample the customs and rules that give legitimacy to legislative decision-making if it helps them gain power. Ultimately, they don’t recognize other people. They suffer from a form of political narcissism, in which they don’t accept the legitimacy of other interests and opinions. They don’t recognize restraints. They want total victories for themselves and their doctrine.

Anyone who disagrees with such a faction is considered a fool, a villain, a traitor or still worse: the failing, certainly, is not reserved to any one end of the political spectrum.

The plurality on which we depend is not merely, as it were, bureaucratic: a matter of there being many authorities and institutions without any clear or permanent acknowledgement of their relative rank or priority. There may no longer be any strong support for a single law against ‘blasphemy,’ nor any protection for some one idea of the divine. But those who attack the very notion of ‘blasphemy’ (as being a limitation on freedom of speech and otherwise harmless action) are usually blind to their own ‘religion’:

The average agnostic of recent times has really had no notion of what he meant by religious liberty and equality. He took his own ethics as self-evident and enforced them; such as decency or the error of the Adamite heresy. Then he was horribly shocked if he heard of anybody else, Moslem or Christian, taking his ethics as self-evident and enforcing them; such as reverence or the error of the Atheist heresy.¹²

Here in the United Kingdom, when immigrants were accused of catching, killing and cooking swans, all properly brought-up Britons were outraged: swans (along with sturgeons, porpoises, whales and dolphins within three miles of the shore) are royal property, and so ‘taboo’. Again, there are no purely objective definitions of what counts as litter: removing litter is a public

¹². G.K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1923): 143.

good, or even a public duty, but walking away with the flowers left out in memory of some celebrity is a crime to be punished by the courts and vilified in the tabloids. To any future archaeologist and historian of ideas, reared in whatever future culture, it will be obvious that there are widely shared sacred symbols, all the more powerful for not being recognized as problematic. Even consumer culture – which might seem to be irreducibly ‘this-worldly’ – is focused on the acquisition of *symbols*, and the exaltation of a particular image of success. Even ‘success’ is, weirdly, not an instrumental notion, but – supposedly – an intrinsic good, and it doesn’t much matter what celebrities are famous for.¹³

Our world is full of little gods and memories. Buildings, clothes, tools and trumpery all shout their names at us. Modernists who believe themselves to be ‘rational atheists’ may be as vulnerable to their influence as any, despite themselves being heirs to the long disenchanting influence of radical *monotheism*. Thomas Sprat, in writing his proleptic History of the Royal Society, wrote vehemently of the Real Philosophy:

The poets of old to make all things look more venerable than they were devised a thousand false Chimaeras; on every Field, River, Grove and Cave they bestowed a Fantasm of their own making: With these they amazed the world. ... And in the modern Ages these Fantastical Forms were reviv’d and possessed Christendom. ... All which abuses if those acute Philosophers did not promote, yet they were never able to overcome; nay, not even so much as King Oberon and his invisible Army. But from the time in which the Real Philosophy has appear’d there is scarce any whisper remaining of such horrors. ... The cours of things goes quietly along, in its own true channel of Natural Causes and Effects. For this we are beholden to Experiments; which though they have not yet completed the discovery of the true world, yet they have already vanquished those wild inhabitants of the false world, that us’d to astonish the minds of men.

He was imitating Athanasius of Alexandria (c296–373 AD):

In former times every place was full of the fraud of oracles, and the utterances of those at Delphi and Dodona and in Boeotia and Lycia and Libya and Egypt and those of the Kabiri and the Pythoness were considered marvellous by the minds of men. But now since Christ has been proclaimed everywhere, their madness too has ceased, and there is no one left among them to give oracles

13. See further my ‘Religion and Law – response to Michael Moxter’: *Ars Disputandi, Supplementary Volume 5* (2011): 57–71 (from which this paragraph is partly drawn).

at all. Then, too, demons used to deceive men's minds by taking up their abode in springs or rivers or trees or stones and imposing upon simple people by their frauds. But now, since the Divine appearing of the Word, all this fantasy has ceased, for by the sign of the cross, if a man will but use it, he drives out their deceits.

Environmentalists – I think mistakenly – have often supposed that this evacuation of the little spirits from our environment is what laid 'nature' and our non-human kindred open to our depredations. It is not obvious that either nature or the non-human were ever much protected by their status as partly divine! Nor that it is necessarily a bad thing to acknowledge that the non-human, like the human, are ordinarily vulnerable creatures, and fellow-voyagers, with us, in the long odyssey of evolution.¹⁴ They need not be thought divine to be acknowledged as *other*:

For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours, they move finished and complete, gifted with the extension of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings: they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth.¹⁵

MANY SOULS AND MANY VIRTUES

The social and political pluralities I have described are also psychological, whether the plurality of outward authorities provides a template for our own individual development or mirrors the usual confusion of human memories and motives. Obviously, we are not *simple* creatures, with wholly orderly and transparent souls:

'Know Yourself' is said to those who because of their selves' multiplicity have the business of counting themselves up and learning that they do not know all the numbers and kinds of things they are, or do not know any one of them, nor what their ruling principle is, or by what they are themselves.¹⁶

Plotinus, as I have already indicated, did suppose that we were only fully real if we were properly focused: our selves' multiplicity is something to be overcome or resolved in service of the divine. As

14. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966 [1949]): 109.

15. Henry Beston, *The Outermost House: a year of life on the great beach of Cape Cod* (New York: Owl Books, 2003 [1928]): 25.

16. Plotinus, *Ennead*, VI.7 [38]. 41, 22–26.

Aristotle also had insisted, our ultimate obligation and desire must be 'to love and serve the Lord': *ton theon theorein kai therapeuein*.¹⁷ Here and now that simplicity is only something to be desired at a distance – and too easily confused with the catastrophic wish to have things only our own 'individual' way.¹⁸ In the fall away from proper companionship the really self-willed bury their heads in the earth, as plants!¹⁹ The Unity of all things, and the simplicity of each soul, is strictly unimaginable to us here-now: better conceive reality as 'a living richly varied sphere, or imagine it as a thing all faces, shining with living faces, or as all the pure souls running together into the same place, with no deficiencies but having all that is their own, and universal Intellect seated on their summits so that the region is illuminated by intellectual light.'²⁰

It is best to acknowledge the truth of our own multiplicity, as well as our involvement with very many 'other' selves and entities: a single truth that contains plurality. It is a lesson that some have always found offensive – expecting rather that *proper* people must be single-minded, and that all self-contradictions or confusions must be signs of deep dishonesty. Actors are not respectable – but also very necessary if we are ever to understand each other.

Lucian of Samosata in his defence of 'pantomime' (that is, of solo mimetic drama) records that a visiting foreigner 'seeing five masks laid ready - that being the number of parts in the piece - and only one pantomime, asked who were going to play the other parts. He was informed that the whole piece would be performed by a single actor. "Your humble servant, sir," cries our foreigner to the artist; "I observe that you have but one body: it had escaped me, that you possessed several souls." Most necessary advice, this, for the pantomime, whose task it is to identify himself with his subject, and make himself part and parcel of the scene that he enacts.'²¹ All of us, in that sense at least, have 'several souls,' and

17. Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* 8.1249b20; see further my 'Therapy and Theory Reconstructed' in *Philosophy as Therapy: Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplementary Volume 66*, eds. Clare Carlisle & Jonardon Ganeri (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 83–102.

18. *Ennead*, IV.8 [6].4.

19. *Ennead*, V.2 [11].2.

20. *Ennead*, VI.7 [38].15, 25–8.

21. Lucian, 'On Pantomime': *Works*, trans. H. W. & F. G. Fowler (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), vol.2, 256.

wear many masks, even if the pantomime does so more consciously.

Some psychological theorists are content to suggest that there are many distinct or distinguishable modules in the human cerebro-nervous system, built up over many million years of evolutionary selection. Clearly, we respond differently in different contexts, under the hormonal influence of different well-developed strategies: we don't *think* clearly when we're hungry, or horny, or harassed. Those who are content simply to 'go with the flow' perhaps never realize how inconsistently they behave and think. Those, on the contrary, who have set themselves some task, intellectual or athletic or ascetic, quickly learn how easily they can be distracted, how many of their own – as they suppose – most 'private' and personal thoughts are simply passing through them, or settling down as undesired obsessions. Those who seek to follow the Delphic instruction – so Hesychios the Priest (c. 8th to 9th century) remarked – find themselves, as it were, gazing into a mirror and sighting the dark faces of the demons peering over their shoulders.²²

Other commentators have been persuaded both that there are people with 'multiple personalities,' none of which are willing to accept responsibility for what their others, their 'alters,' do, and that all of us are on the edge of a similar dissociation. At the peak of diagnostic fashion the number of 'alters' identified in particular unhappy patients increased from two or three²³ to as many as were needed, it seems, to engage in any particular task to the momentary exclusion of other duties. 'In systems where extreme splitting occurs, clients may report a host of personality fragments created to do specific tasks, such as cooking, cleaning the house, or going to school.'²⁴ It is difficult not to sympathize with Nicholas Spanos's acerbic judgement: 'the increases over time in the number of alters per MPD patient is reminiscent of the increases in the number of demon selves that were commonly

22. G.E.H. Palmer, P. Sherrard and Kallistos Ware eds. *The Philokalia*, vol.1 (London: Faber, 1979): 123. See also Plato, *Phaedrus* 229b4–30a6, where Socrates puts aside literal, physicalist interpretations of the creatures of Greek myth, in favour of asking whether he is himself 'a more complex creature and more puffed up with pride than Typhon.'

23. For example, in the story of Miss Beauchamp according to Morton Prince *The Dissociation of a Personality* (New York: Longmans, Greene & Co., 1908).

24. Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995): 19.

manifested in demoniacs who were exposed to protracted series of exorcisms during periods of peak interest in demonic possession.²⁵

Dealing with such fractured personalities – for whatever the ontological significance of the syndrome there are patients in considerable and possibly remediable distress – may demand a lot more sympathy than, for example, Morton Prince was prepared to give his patient. Somehow those in distress must, like a fractured polity, negotiate some way of living. In Prince's day this was, perhaps, accomplished by silencing or expelling whatever personality seemed less familiar. Later therapists have usually preferred to establish ways of allowing each 'alter' some time to live as she chooses, provided that life is not made too difficult for a later incoming alter. A very few – like Allison – may draw attention to the phenomenon of the 'inner self helper,' a voice and character which distinguishes itself from the patient and seeks to assist her.²⁶ One odd story – this from a study of eating disorders – describes how one abused girl prayed desperately for spiritual support, and promptly encountered a frog willing to sit on her hand. 'It occurred to her that she could bring the spirit of the frog inside of her and carry this spirit with her. This arrangement seemed agreeable to the frog, and henceforth Margaret and her frog became inseparable.'²⁷ Not all the voices that seem to come from outside merely dispossess the 'host'. Nor are they all indifferent to the host's being and welfare. In older terms they may be 'guardian angels,' *daimones* rather than demons: at once superior in power and knowledge to the ordinary self, and also in some way serving as a 'higher' self with whom the host may one day identify:

If a man is able to follow the spirit (*daimon*) which is above him, he comes to be himself above, living that spirit's life, and giving the pre-eminence to that better part of himself to which he is being led; and after that spirit he rises to another, until he reaches the heights. For the soul is

25. Nicholas P. Spanos, *Multiple Identities and False Memories: a sociocognitive perspective* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 1996): 232.

26. Ralph B. Allison, 'Multiple Personality Disorder, Dissociative Identity Disorder, and Internalized Imaginary Companions': *Hypnos*, 25(3) (1998):125-133; and *Mind in many Pieces: revealing the spiritual side of multiple personality disorder* (Los Osos, CA: Cie Publishing, 1999 [2nd ed.]).

27. Richard Maisel, David Epston, and Alisa Borden, *Biting the Hand That Starves You: Inspiring Resistance to Anorexia/Bulimia* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co, 2004): 231.

many things, and all things, both the things above and the things below down to the limits of all life, and we are each one of us an intelligible universe, making contact with this lower world by the powers of soul below, but with the intelligible world by its powers above.²⁸

Here-now, we may find ourselves advised and even bullied by our *daimon* – as ‘Sally’ bullied ‘Miss Beauchamp’ – but if all goes well we shall find ourselves awakening to that ‘higher’ self, and find yet another guiding star above us. Even Prince, who decided to drive Sally away (for no better reason, it seems, than that he found her intolerably perky), thought her capacities were valuable: if only she could hide again in ‘the unconscious’, where she supposedly belonged, her talents and wit could be used by the newly dominant personality, ‘the real Miss Beauchamp’.²⁹ Others – including Plotinus – might suspect that it was Sally who was the Real Miss Beauchamp, and the better known, familiar personality something more like a robot, or at best a convenient mask to help her deal with her indifferent neighbours.

Those of us who do not self-identify as suffering from ‘multiple personality disorder’ (or ‘dissociative identity disorders’ as such things are now regarded) may still acknowledge that we are multiple, that we often act and think in ways that in other modes and moments we deplore or disavow – or just occasionally admire. By Homer’s account, perhaps, we have been invaded, whereas moderns would, most often, think that we are insufficiently integrated. Should we always resist invasion? Should we always hope to be whole? Might we not rather acknowledge, as in the political case, that difference and disagreement are the norm? Might we not acknowledge what we might have learned from biological theory, that we are colony organisms, compounded both of cells organized by a common template to perform many various functions, and also of cells, from mitochondria to gut bacteria, with a distinct genetic nature? A once fashionable account of Homer suggested that his characters were openly compounded, with hardly any sense of a unitary self, but rather a battleground for competing spirits, a congeries

28. Plotinus, *Ennead* III.4 [15].3, 18–24.

29. I have explored some of these options further in ‘Personal Identity and Identity Disorders’ in *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychiatry*, eds., K.W.M. Fulford, Martin Davies, George Graham, John Z. Sadler, Giovanni Sanghelli and Tim Thornton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 911–28.

of distinguishable dreams and faculties. That story was at least an exaggeration – his heroes (Agamemnon, Achilles, Odysseus, Hector, Helen) are characters as recognizable as any in the most modern novel, even in their apparent follies and inconsistencies. But perhaps the story uncovered a partial truth about our own existence. There is no single, ruling monad in our lives, but rather an unstable, shifting and incomplete agreement between many organs and organic systems to which we can, if we wish, give separate names. Trying to cut any one of them out of our lives entirely may be as disastrous as was Hippolytus's devotion to Artemis (at the expense of Aphrodite) or Pentheus' refusal to acknowledge Dionysus.³⁰ We need the conversation: indeed without it we cannot be *thinking* at all – a merely solitary intelligence is unthinkable.

MANY WORLDS AND MANY GODS

Are the political and personal spheres of life enough to give a sense of a polytheistic system, and a reason for respecting it? Perhaps it is possible to advance a little further, and far more controversially. Maybe there are after all 'gods many, and lords many.'³¹ Maybe the different institutions and authorities in the social and political sphere, the different motives and mannerisms in the personal, are outward and visible signs of a real plurality in 'heaven'. Even the Abrahamic religions, after all, despite their overt insistence that the God of Abraham alone demands and deserves an absolute devotion, acknowledge that there are other 'gods': not to be worshipped, maybe, but certainly to be acknowledged as real powers and perhaps even as loyal servants of the Highest (or rebels against Him). We may have succeeded in eliminating any consciousness of spirits of wood or stream, any need to suppose that there are planetary rulers to guide the wandering stars, any wish to encounter non-corporeal beings with their own plans and motives. We cannot easily now blame any diseases upon 'demons', at least of a kind that would submit to ritual exorcism. The suggestion that there was a pre-human Fall of cosmic spirits, and that this world here is irretrievably damaged by their incursion, is widely mocked.³²

30. According, respectively, to Euripides' *Hippolytus* and *The Bacchae*.

31. Paul, *I Corinthians* 8.5.

32. For a recent defence at least of its possibility see Hud Hudson, *The Fall and Hypertime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

On the other hand, we are more conscious than ever before of the humanly unimaginable extent of the sidereal universe (assuming it to be, in some sense, actually a *universe*³³). Our ancestors mistook the orderly motion of the heavens (as these were observed from Earth) as an intrinsic order of constellations, each whirling in its own sphere. Nowadays we recognize, or at least believe, that the planets, stars and galaxies may whirl in spheres and circles, but not around the Earth. The hidden harmony, as Heracleitos said, is better than the apparent (but no less orderly)!³⁴ We have mapped, or credible experts have mapped, the superclusters of galaxies all the way up to Laniakea ('immeasurable heaven', in Hawaiian) and Perseus-Pisces.³⁵ We have discovered, or credible experts have discovered, that *visible* matter is only a fraction even of the material cosmos, that most material is invisible. In this immensity we can hardly deny the possibility of entities at least equivalent in power to any imagined godlet, and merely *hope* that any such entities will have motives neither too like nor too unlike our own. At any rate it seems absurd to imagine that only our own form of life is central or most significant. We may no longer expect to find lost worlds and civilizations somewhere on or under Earth, but this has merely displaced the fantasy to worlds and regions far away. Even our science fiction writers – understandably – have mostly imagined *anthropic* worlds and species, while acknowledging more privately that any living things that do not share our evolutionary history are likely to be very different from us: after all, most sentient life on Earth is very different from us. We may seek to discover signs of life 'outside,' but have no clear or indefeasible idea of what it is we're seeking! What is perhaps the oddest outcome is that speculative cosmologists – eager to provide an explanation for the apparent 'fine-tuning' of the cosmos that allows the existence of living things – have postulated a strictly metaphysical array of All the Possible Worlds There Are, outcomes of variously different versions of an initial blossoming. Otherwise, they fear, they might

33. See Stanley L. Jaki, *Is There a Universe?* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994).

34. Heracleitos, DK22B54 (from Hippolytus *Refutation of All Heresies* 9.9.5.3 Marcovich): Waterfield op.cit., 40 (F24).

35. See <http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/nature13674>; R. Brent Tully, Hélène Courtois, Yehuda Hoffman & Daniel Pomarède, 'The Laniakea supercluster of galaxies': *Nature* 513 (2014): 71–3.

have to admit the plausibility of a cosmic engineer with humanly accessible motives: God, apparently, wants at least the opportunity for there to be things like us! But if All the Possible Worlds do really exist – whether over aeons or in inaccessible directions – then there are also worlds of an Epicurean sort, where entities have immediate access to powers we can only imagine (including, we may suppose, the power to intersect *our* world as well). These entities would no longer be merely *possible*, but certainly real and active. And there may be no further distinction between the notion of a Cosmic Engineer and the Many Worlds Hypothesis: on the latter hypothesis there must be many cosmic engineers!

So we may imagine that there are intelligent extra-terrestrial, extragalactic, extra-cosmic entities equipped with whatever engineering and socio-political prowess we please. Maybe they have even passed beyond any need for corporeal being – it was a very common theme in 50's science fiction, and has – in a way – been re-imagined in the wake of 'virtual realities' and 'cyberspace'. Maybe – it has been a little more seriously proposed – we are ourselves unknowing residents in a vast 'virtual reality' composed by the hyperintelligent aliens of the End Times (or even in a rather nearer future, in the imminent development of these technologies here – as we suppose – on Earth).³⁶ Quite what plot or plots the virtualities are running we can only learn from experience – as we would in a more 'fundamental' world as well. As far as we can tell from that experience there isn't a plot that has yet revealed its unity! We live in a complex of stories – and perhaps that is true even if we are not 'virtual'.

So though we have abandoned 'superstition' we may still be confronted by the challenge of multiplicity, and by the possibility that we are victims – or willing participants – in a grand deception. The point is not merely that we are living in a world for which we have no Grand Unifying Theory. We cannot wholly rule out the possibility that we are living in a literal drama, or many literal dramas, designed by powers that dwarf our own, with wholly unimagined motives. Maybe they are merely bored. Maybe they are still trying out possibilities. Maybe they are educating their young, or reforming their worse criminals. Maybe they are breeding

36. Nick Bostrom, 'Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?': *Philosophical Quarterly* 53 (2003): 243–255.

their own successors. Whatever plotline any of us may notice or prefer we cannot rule out the real existence and attractive force of others. We cannot be sure that there are no discontinuities and inconsistencies in the dramas, any more than in any of the familiar sagas that we knowingly read and watch. There may, in short, be gods of a kind not wholly dissimilar to the ancient fantasies, but not requiring us wholly to abandon the inspiring thought that truth is, *in the end*, without a flaw. What we call natural law may only be a plot device, but there may still be absolute laws to govern the creator gods' behaviour. Unfortunately, we cannot – by hypothesis – know what they are (nor even whether our creators – as long as they are themselves 'contingent beings' – may not themselves be subject to a similar dramatic power).³⁷

The poet W.B. Yeats imagined that the coming age would consciously reject the old: 'because we had worshipped a single god it would worship many or receive from Joachim de Flora's Holy Spirit a multitudinous influx.'³⁸ Quite what he intended seems uncertain (though it was a theme which he often revisited), and we may reasonably doubt that Joachim de Flora would have been entirely sympathetic: his age of the Spirit was under the patronage of the One God as Spirit, not scattered amongst many differing spirits and authorities. William Blake, who also acknowledged the compresence of many 'gods', was adamant that they were only 'thieves and rebels' if they were 'separated from man or humanity, who is Jesus the Saviour.'³⁹ This is of course of a piece with the theme I have myself reiterated: that the many gods, lords, worlds and institutions must in the end be housed in the one larger world, and obedient to one law. But whether or not that is to be the final judgement we are still faced here-now by 'gods many and lords many'. Perhaps these are only metaphors or symbols, as fictional as any popular play or picture. But perhaps they are also real, independent in their essence of anything we

37. See my 'Waking-Up: a neglected model for the after-life': *Inquiry* 26 (1983–4): 209–30.

38. W.B. Yeats, first in a letter to Florence Farr in December 1895; also in his introduction (1935) to 'The Resurrection' (1927): *Explorations* (London: Macmillan, 1962), 393.

39. William Blake, 'Descriptive Catalogue' (1809), no.3 (Chaucer and the pilgrims): *Complete Works*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London, Oxford University Press, 1966): 571.

may happen to think about them. At least we cannot rule out the story of their existence as entities outside the discoverable frame of natural law, part of the apparatus that sustains the visible cosmos. Indeed we cannot even rule them out as entities who are still subject to most of the same discoverable laws as us, whether they are part of a Galactic civilization far advanced from ours or denizens of some other cosmos in the expanding multiverse. The best we can expect in this latter case, of course, is that they will be *Epicurean* gods, having neither interest in harassing us, nor very much power to do so. The worst – which is a prospect often explored in our contemporary nightmares – is that they are equivalent to Lovecraftian horrors, soon to repossess the world.⁴⁰

Or else they are after all what our ancestors usually supposed: powers neither wholly maleficent nor wholly benevolent, but merely facts to endure or to enjoy. Our lives are built piecemeal from many different elements, constrained by many differing impulses and goals. The organizers of our lives, whether we are truly inhabitants of this minor planet far out on the edge of Laniakea or bemused participants in a world-wide illusion, may make their presence felt, exactly, in the manifold authorities of the state, and the many impulses and alters which beset us. ‘Organized Religion’, although the institution has deserved most of the condemnation now bestowed on it, has always been the attempt to channel and – almost – domesticate those many impulses and authorities. No one should ever suppose that a *disorganized* religion would somehow be humane. On the contrary, the only hope for humanity is that we uncover, exactly, our humanity, and find appropriate places for powers that would otherwise destroy us. We need an appropriate story – and I have already hinted at what stories might be the more acceptable here-now.

These stories, obviously, are myths, in the sense Plotinus defined⁴¹: narrative expositions suggestive of eternal truths (or at any rate supposed truths). The truths that perhaps they intimate is that intelligence is always dialectical, thought always a conversation, and that the best available image of a supreme intelligence must also be

40. See Charles Stross’s engaging (and also horrifying) satire on both the Lovecraftian nightmare and the all-too-familiar stresses of an embattled secret bureaucracy: *The Atrocity Archives* (Urbana: Golden Gryphon Press, 2004) and its sequels.

41. See Plotinus, *Ennead* III.5 [50].9, 24–9.

social – a conversation that at least we might hope almost to overhear:

The meanest man in grey fields gone
 Behind the set of sun,
 Heareth between star and other star,
 Through the door of the darkness fallen ajar,
 The council, eldest of things that are,
 The talk of the Three in One.⁴²

In spending our energies in trying to hear and understand an imagined conversation in the sidereal heavens we are acting out that dream, of listening in on ‘the council’, and finding there the archetypes, the many forms of beauty, that constitute Reality. We are hoping to join the cavalcade of Heaven that Plato described in his *Phaedrus*.⁴³ We may reasonably hope that the cavalcade, the cosmic conversation, contains pluralities, as the very condition of its own existence: this is a better image even of traditional Abrahamic faith than tales of a cosmic monarchy, a single tyrant. The council, chorus, cavalcade, so Plotinus would say, was *one* in its attention to its leader,⁴⁴ but multiple in all the various steps and tones and gambits that bring the music to life.

42. G.K.Chesterton, ‘The Ballad of the White Horse’: *Collected Poems* (London: Methuen, 1950): 232; see Fred Sanders *The Deep Things of God: how the Trinity changes everything* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2010): 80–1. The Trinity is not an exclusively *Christian* notion, it needs to be said: in all the Abrahamic faiths the Word and Spirit of God are simultaneously uncreated and distinct both from each other, and from their eternal source. But that is another story.

43. Plato, *Phaedrus* 247a (tr. Benjamin Jowett): ‘Zeus, the mighty lord, holding the reins of a winged chariot, leads the way in heaven, ordering all and taking care of all; and there follows him the array of gods and demigods, marshalled in eleven bands; Hestia alone abides at home in the house of heaven; of the rest they who are reckoned among the princely twelve march in their appointed order. They see many blessed sights in the inner heaven, and there are many ways to and fro, along which the blessed gods are passing, every one doing his own work; he may follow who will and can, for jealousy has no place in the celestial choir.’

44. Plotinus, *Ennead* VI.9 [9].8, 38ff: ‘*koruphaion*’ means either the lead dancer or the musician at the centre of the chorus, not – as some have translated the term – its *conductor*.