

## Polytheism and Monotheism: A Bergsonian Analogy

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Although it is common to assume that monotheism is a natural and logical outcome of polytheism's intrinsic development (*praeparatio evangelica* as per Eusebius), an alternative view would postulate that the two spiritual phenomena do not cancel each other and can even interact with each other, not necessarily to the detriment of either party. It is true that the watershed between the two may at first seem to be impenetrable. Polytheism (=traditional / primal / indigenous religion) derives from experience, more specifically the experience of our collective interaction with the environment (not simply our perception of it as Kant and many others have mistakenly thought) and the shared symbols we generate thereby in order to codify and utilise those discoveries (=revelations). Among other things, this accounts for the original identity and later persistent similarity between linguistic, religious and scientific symbols, as described in detail by Cassirer in his *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*.

As for monotheism, it relies chiefly on *a priori* intuition / philosophical abstraction / moral imperative / logical deduction. In its purest form, it produces a God in the style of Descartes and Spinoza. Such a God is dogged by an inherent paradox from the very beginning. On the one hand, God is supposed to exist out of logical necessity (*existit necessarie* as per Spinoza). On the other hand, such a situation, once conceded, gives rise to a number of secondary considerations (e.g. universal evil, predetermination, freewill) that in turn render God's existence highly problematic, almost impossible. To put it short, from the purely logical perspective, a theistic God *must* and *cannot* exist at the same time. (Depending on whether we emphasize the first of the second aspect of the paradox, we get, respectively, either theism or atheism). Neither can such a God be derived from experience, as Kant has convincingly shown. This is because we as *finite* beings simply do not possess the right organs and notions to perceive and conceive an infinity *per se*. The best we can do is to imagine 'infinite' movement in space or time as far as our patience lasts.

Facing this conundrum, monotheism has to turn to polytheism for substratum, trying to reconcile the inevitably partial / finite nature of the available experience with its own claim to universality, infinity, all-inclusivity. This results in a compromise where polytheism's finite, albeit experience-derived, entities and their attributes are recycled into symbols of the infinite, perfect but ultimately ungraspable Supreme Being. The above relation bears a striking resemblance to that between the two major kingdoms of living organisms on Earth – plants and animals. Like animals, who are unable to assimilate inorganic matter and have to consume plants for subsistence; monotheism, unable to experience the infinity of its postulated deity, has to 'consume' the abundant but imperfect experiences of polytheism, reprocessing them into a different spiritual substance. The above analogy, although not absolute, nevertheless gives rise to many interesting inferences on the interdependence and potential convergence of the two spiritual kingdoms. I honestly wonder if such a conclusion would earn me a commendation from Bergson if he had a chance to hear it.