

How many gods?: a fragment of a dialogue This dialogue began as an appendix to a chapter of my book *The Importance of Being Understood*. It is meant to elicit sympathy for the idea that sometimes what it means to say "believes that p" depends on what p is. If this is true, then one way in which people coordinate what they mean by "believes" is by coordinating what they believe. The point is not theological, though it is with religious beliefs that the idea is most plausible. But the series editor, José Bermudez, didn't want light touches in his series. (There, José, suppress a smile and earn a tease.)

Polly and Mona are half way through a long discussion and several bottles of wine, which began when Polly claimed to be a scientific polytheist.

Mona: It's a strange experience arguing with you, and rather disorienting. I usually get trouble from philosophers because I think there is a god, and they think that is one too many. You think that is far too few.

Polly: Still, I have less trouble believing in many gods and also in the world of science and hard evidence, than you have believing in your one glommed-together theological monstrosity. I believe that people sometimes know things of whose sources they are completely ignorant, for example about what people to trust and what actions may be disastrous. It is as if this information comes to them from some power outside themselves. That power is Apollo; that's its traditional name. I believe that people are tied to other people by passion and devotion, so I believe that love is a real force in our lives. Sometimes I give that force a name and express my gratitude to it. I believe that it is good for people to express their gratitude for surviving voyages, years, marriages, unscathed, and so I think that it is good that they address their thanks to the gods. I think that now that we understand chance,

randomness, and chaos somewhat differently we should rethink our attitudes to gratitude and hope.

Mona: I'm not sure how scientific all of that is, but that's not the issue now. The issue for me is how you move from banalities about everyday life to assertions that there are *persons*, *powers* whose existence you can use to explain things.

Polly: Explanation doesn't really come into it. More a matter of description and expression. I think the problem is that being a monotheist you've made religious belief into something heroic, and have trouble seeing how easy and ordinary it could be.

Mona: That is simply evasive; please answer the question. Give me half a reason to believe that there is a single force behind people having intuitions about the future, but a different single force behind the power of love, and a yet different force whenever people come through difficult times unharmed. I'd say each of these is a dozen things, and you have to step a lot further back, as I do, before you find a single factor, and then it - He - lies behind all of them.

Polly: Well, certainly you can carve things up different ways. Most people thank different gods for different kinds of good luck (when they thank any, that is.) And at some times one appeals to a quite different whole set of gods than at others, of course.

Mona: Your position is becoming more and more incredible. There has to be a reason for seeing one cause or another behind some set of events. You can't just believe things on whim.

Polly: Often there is no cause at all. If one child dies of meningitis and soon after the other is run down by a motorcyclist and then your partner leaves you the same day you loose your job it may be just coincidence, like a coin coming down heads eight

times in a row. (You probably think there is one ultimate cause, the will of God.) You should still personalize your fate and talk to it, though.

Mona: But personalizing your fate is something you do, not something you believe. It can't be true or false: beliefs not only can be true or false, they have to be.

Polly: Let me try another tack. Suppose you take two sets of objects, like these three bottles and these four glasses. Now first I'm going to re-arrange the bottles (easiest if I empty the fullish one into the glasses), as follows. (*Polly takes bottles ABC, and moves them around into the pattern CBA.*) Suppose I want to do the same to the glasses. "The same" could mean many two things. The two that occur to me are first this, which will be easiest if we each empty a glass. (*She takes the four glasses 1234 and reverses their order to get 4321.*) Or then this. (*She takes the rightmost and moves it to the left end, and then exchanges the two rightmost, to get 4132.*) Sorry I spilled such a lot. Which operation on the glasses is "really the same" as what I did to the bottles? Neither or both. Both possibilities are there, both perfectly real: I could give you an algebraic formulation of each and apply them to absolutely anything. So there's no danger of their not existing, or of our having to look at the evidence to decide which one exists, so that we can abuse rivals who like to see the other. It's just the same with gods.

Mona: My God, at any rate, is not a bloodless possibility. He actually makes things happen (well, in a manner of speaking, but that's another discussion.) And there is a fact about what his actual true nature is.

Polly: And that is why there is considerable doubt whether he exists, and why those who think he does tend to do evil things to one another when they disagree about that actual true nature. One is

different from many in more than just number. With one there has to be one fact, which is one way and not the other.

Mona: Many is beginning to sound a lot like none, to me. Let me try another tack myself. Do you accept that if you give thanks to a god then there is a god you give thanks to? And that if someone else gives thanks to a god there is a god that other person gives thanks to, so either they are giving thanks to the same god or to different ones?

Polly: Well, if two people belong to the same community and understand each other when they use the same names for their gods then of course they are dealing with the same gods. As Cicero said, "Religio, id est cultus deorum". If they do not, then there is not really an answer to the question. Are Freya, Aphrodite, and Venus the same goddess? Are gravitons the same as suitable distortions of space-time? Is the number two the unit set of the unit set of the null set? There is something very wrong about asking about identity and difference here. Wanting there to be only one right answer to such questions is a kind of disease, a trap. Very hard to think your way out of once it has grabbed you. If you believe in many gods then you can see how the same facts might just be described in terms of just one god, but if you believe in just one you think it is somewhere between a sad mistake and an awful crime to make god plural. Monotheism breeds intolerance.

Mona: I see what's wrong with you. You don't actually believe in these gods of yours. You just think it makes a kind of sense to talk about them and act as if they played a role in your life. That's not belief, it's make-believe. In fact, you're not really saying that there are all these gods. You're saying the words but it's a kind of a game, not really sincere.

Polly: Strange. I've been coming to a similar conclusion about you. You think someone doesn't

believe something unless they can give a reason for rejecting all rival beliefs. If that were so most sensible people would have very very few beliefs. But people believe many things, so belief has to be a more flexible business. We can both accept that a belief makes a claim to be the true answer to a question: but it has to be an answer relative to a certain way of asking the question, with a certain background. You can't ask for more than that.

Mona: So from my point of view when you assert something it's a move in a game, and from your point of view when I assert something it's something impossibly serious.

Polly: Yes, I don't think I can take the universe, or myself, quite that seriously.

(The discussion goes on, and on.)