Many practices and styles of devotion within polytheism are treated by modern scholars as implying a “tendency” towards monotheism. Worshipers in ancient (as well as modern) polytheisms sometimes identify one God with another, fuse two Gods together into a third, or experience one God as the focus of all things; all the while still recognizing many Gods. Scholars have coined terms like “henotheism” to refer to this seeming dichotomy while modern polytheists often term these practices as “soft” (as opposed to “hard”) polytheism. In “soft” polytheism, so the explanation goes, the Gods are all understood to be aspects of one God, or as emanations from a single Source with no fixed identities. Only in “hard” polytheism, it is argued, are the Gods seen as unique individuals.

From the viewpoint of the pagan Platonists of late antiquity, however, this distinction would have been nonsensical. These thinkers reasoned that these (so-called “soft”) elements of devotion actually expressed the uniqueness and individuality of Gods that is the essence of polytheism itself.

Consider the core principle of “hard” polytheism, namely, that the Gods possess superlative individuality and uniqueness. Supreme individuality, however, cannot be that possessed by something to which everything else is external, but rather belongs to something with all things within it. Something that is merely indivisible in an atomistic sense does not have the kind of existence we associate with a God.
Gods — as polytheists have always understood them — possess will, agency, and consciousness. These properties, however, reach their zenith in encompassing the world, rather than by excluding it. Similarly, that which is supremely unique is not what distinguishes itself from everything else by increasingly trivial differences, but rather that in which the attributes shared with other things are uniquely its own. This is the kind of existence we recognize in Beings that we call “who” rather than objects we call “what.”

• *Panta-en-pasin: All things in each thing, uniquely.* The Platonic philosophers of ancient Greece developed a remarkable theology which explains many of these characteristics of polytheistic devotion, without assuming that all Gods are one God, or that they are just a small number of divine functions dressed up in culturally-specific garb. Moreover, it is an approach conceived by ancient polytheists that arose organically in a polytheistic culture, rather than one applied to polytheism by modern scholars operating in a context largely inimical to a polytheistic worldview.

An ancient maxim in Hellenic thought, attributed loosely to unidentified “Pythagoreans” summarizes this idea thusly. “All things are in all things, but in each appropriately,” (*panta en pasin, oikeios de en hekasto*). The *panta-en-pasin* maxim, as we may call it, doesn’t say that all things are in one thing, but that all things are in each thing, and in a way specific to each thing.

A similar concept is embodied in the metaphor of Indra’s Net, which appears first in Buddhist literature (circa 3rd-4th c. CE), but which probably originated in Hindu thought. The God Indra, so the story goes, possesses a net which is studded with jewels, each one of which reflects all the others, as well as the reflections themselves. This jewel-studded net is understood to be a symbol for all things.

Both *panta-en-pasin* and the metaphor of Indra’s net express the concept that individuality implies relation, but in a surprising way. Relations are not something external added onto individuals; instead, relations are in individuals in some fashion — relations with other things are the presence of things *themselves* in one another. This doesn’t mean that things aren’t unique. The jewels in Indra’s Net are individuals, above and beyond whatever they share. What they share above all else is reflectivity; but we can imagine this property infinitely varying, as each jewel reflects the others according to its unique shape, color, and other traits. Moreover, if we are really to appreciate the metaphor, then we must assume that there is no point of view on the whole net other than the reflections in each jewel. The jewels are not merely perspectives on the totality — rather, the universe itself is nothing other than these myriad perspectives. We may take any jewel, at any time, as the center of the net, and plot the whole system of relations starting from it and ending with it. Compare this idea with the formula, preserved for us in the medieval text *Liber XXIV philosophorum* (but perhaps of ancient pedigree) that speaks of the divine (‘God’) as “a circle whose center is everywhere and its circumference nowhere.”

• *The Gods, as the ultimate individuals, include everything — even each other.* When polytheists see all things and all Gods in a chosen God — whether in theological musings or in a specific ritual or devotion — this is not in spite of, but on account of that God’s uniqueness and individuality. One example of this phenomenon is when, in the famous *Bhagavad Gita* from the *Mahabharata*, the God Krishna reveals to His devotee Arjuna all the classes of divinities and the whole universe itself contained in His person. Likewise, a Greek hymn to the Egyptian Goddess...
Isis says that, “Egyptians call you Thiouis because You, being One, are all other Goddesses invoked by the nations.” The Egyptian word Thiouis is simply the feminine form of the word meaning “unique,” an epithet given to every deity in Egyptian theology. As Egyptologist Erik Hornung remarks, “Every Egyptian god is ‘unique in his fashion:’ there is no other who is the same as him.”

This is exactly how the pagan Platonists saw it, as well: each God has all things and all the other Gods and Goddesses within Her because of Her unity, integrity, or individuality. The Platonists recognized that individuality was so essential to the nature of godhood that they called the Gods henads, or “units.” The Gods are the things most one, not because they are all one thing, but because to be an ultimate individual is to include everything.

To engage with a Deity as all, according to this point of view, is simply to engage with Them as who They peculiarly are. In a certain sense, this is true of all individuals. It’s more true of individuals who have the nature of persons, than it is of things like concepts, which exclude a great deal as simply inessential.

For example, to understand the abstract concept of a triangle, to know what a triangle is, I don’t have to know anything about any particular triangles, I just have to know the definition of a triangle. In order for this definition to make sense, I do need to know other figures, and perhaps the whole of geometry, and a good deal of mathematics in general. But there are definitely limits on how much I need to know in order to grasp a definition. The nature of units of the personal kind, however, is beyond and beneath essence — “whatness” — and so they don’t have definitions, and there are no clear limits to what I need to know in order to grasp them.

The Gods have proper names, and we intuitively understand the difference between proper names (given only to individuals) and common nouns (applied to undifferentiated members of a group.)

• How does this matter to polytheists? We see this inclusiveness of each God in the practice of many polytheists. A polytheist does not call upon a God merely for concerns relating to a narrow function. Aphrodite’s most intense devotees do not call on her merely as “Goddess of love,” for example, but as Goddess of everything, at least potentially. At the cult centers of ancient deities, we often find the Gods and Goddesses worshiped in this expansive manner. We also see this pattern in modern day Hinduism, although it is often misinterpreted by Westerners under the influence of hegemonic monotheism as “monism” and denying the reality of the many Gods.

If Gods understood in this manner transcend narrow functions, what makes them distinct? This question, however natural, is poorly-formed: it asks a “what” question (a question more properly addressed regarding objects) about the ultimate “whos” (persons.) For this reason the Platonists said that the Gods are hyperousios, “beyond essence.”

The Gods have proper names, just like we humans do. We intuitively understand the difference between proper names (applied to individual persons) and common nouns (applied to undifferentiated members of a group.) Polytheism requires that we apply this same logic to the Gods, but without carrying over the aspects of it that only apply to mortals.

• How do Gods differ from mortals?

We humans primarily experience this reflection of all-things-in-ourselves as a kind of radical dependency. We realize that everything that happens, and everyone who is now and has been, determines what it is possible for us to be or to become. Due to this universal human experience, Buddhist interpretations of the metaphor of Indra’s net tend to stress the emptiness and dependency of all beings.
But polytheistic devotion implies that the Allness of a God involves much greater power to shape reality than ours, simply on account of the constraints that our mortal nature places upon us humans. Were there something that had more power to shape reality than the Gods, it would rightly be considered a God instead, or to a greater degree. If nothing had the power to shape reality, then any responsibility for our actions would be forfeit. So we are more or less compelled to think of the universe as a place in which persons have agency, as well as restrictions upon that agency. Furthermore, it is logical to assume that Gods are the kind of persons with more agency than us, and probably have the most agency that is imaginable.

The primordial distinction of the Gods — and their agency in and through all things — are ultimately one and the same thing. We can find this expressed in the Platonists’ way of sometimes turning the names of Gods into adverbs. Hence Olympiodorus (6th c. CE) says that “all the Gods are in Zeus “zeusically” [diós] and in another [Hera] “heraically” [héraios], for no God is imperfect.” We can see these adverbs as the oikeios of the panta-en-pasin maxim filled in with proper names: all things are in all things “appropriately,” and so all things are in Hera “heraically.” In a similar fashion, Proclus (5th c. CE) speaks about “the Hermes in Zeus” and the “Hermeses” in other Gods, by virtue of which those Gods exercise Hermes’ peculiar power of persuasion. Sometimes Platonists express this through speaking about the “idiom” (idion) or persona, we might say, of a God in another God, such as the Zeus and Poseidon in Pluton through which persons Damascius (5th-6th c. CE) says that Pluton is able to send souls from the place of judgment either to the palace of Zeus, or to Poseidon for reincarnation. If Zeus is in Hermes “hermaically,” and Hermes in Zeus “zeusically,” then this means that the adverbial nature that goes along with each God’s unique identity is something that other Gods can activate, so that Zeus can “do” Hermes and Hermes can “do” Zeus by actualizing the idiom or persona of the other God in themselves.

**Devotional Polytheism brings us closer to the Gods.** Just as a jewel in Indra’s net reflects the other jewels near it more clearly than those further from away, so too we “see” in the Gods to whom we are devoted more readily the other Gods who are “nearer” to Them.

There are two ways in which Gods are “near” one another: first, through being part of the same divine “family” or being in the same myths together, which we usually refer to as being in the same pantheon. Secondly, the Gods can be “near” one another through having similar characteristic patterns of activity, which we talk about across pantheons, like when we say that Hermes and Anubis are both psychopomps (Gods who conduct souls into the netherworld.) We can discern more of these relations in a God we worship, and to whom we are ’near’, than in one who is more ‘remote’ to us. We can see this as having to do with the kind of jewels that we ourselves are: the more sensitive we become to a particular God, the more highly polished is the surface by which we reflect Her, the more Gods and the more of the universe we are able to see in our chosen God, appreciating more of Her peculiar nature and Her complex relations. This process—of perceiving and embracing more and more of the connections within and between deities while respecting their inherent individuality—is the essence of polytheistic devotion.

---

**Endnotes**

1. The maxim is stated, for example, in proposition 103 of Proclus’ *Elements of Theology*. For its use and attribution, see the discussion by E. R. Dodds in his edition of the *Elements*, p. 254.


