

Monism

Monism is any philosophical view which holds that there is unity in a given field of inquiry. Accordingly, some philosophers may hold that the universe is one rather than dualistic or pluralistic. Monisms may be theologically syncretic by proposing that there is one God who has many manifestations in the diverse religious traditions.

Philosophical monism

Monism in philosophy can be defined according to three kinds:

1. Idealism, phenomenalism, or mentalistic monism which holds that only mind is real.
2. Neutral monism, which holds that both the mental and the physical can be reduced to some sort of third substance, or energy.
3. Physicalism or materialism, which holds that only the physical is real, and that the mental or spiritual can be reduced to the physical.

Certain other positions are hard to pigeonhole into the above categories, see links below. Moreover, these positions do not provide a definition of what does it mean to be "real".

Ancient Western philosophers

The following pre-Socratic philosophers described reality as being monistic:

- Thales: Water.
- Anaximander: Apeiron (meaning 'the undefined infinite'). Reality is some, one thing, but we cannot know what.
- Anaximenes: Air.
- Heraclitus: Change, symbolized by fire (in that everything is in constant flux).
- Parmenides: Being. Reality is an unmoving perfect sphere, unchanging, undivided. We say there are things that exist and things that don't exist; Parmenides wrote that nothing doesn't exist, only existence does.

And post-Socrates:

- Neopythagorians such as Apollonius of Tyana centered their cosmologies on the Monad or One.
- Stoics, like Spinoza later, taught that there is only one substance, identified as God.
- Middle Platonism under such works as Numenius express the Universe emanating from the Monad or One.
- Neoplatonism is Monistic. Plotinus taught that there was an ineffable transcendent God, 'The One,' of which subsequent realities were emanations. From The One emanates the Divine Mind (Nous), the Cosmic Soul (Psyche), and the World (Cosmos).

Monism, pantheism, and panentheism

Following a long and still current tradition H.P. Owen (1971: 65) claimed that

"Pantheists are 'monists'...they believe that there is only one Being, and that all other forms of reality are either modes (or appearances) of it or identical with it."

Although almost all pantheists are monists, some pantheists may also be not-monists, but undeniably monists were the most famous pantheisms as that of Stoics, Plotinus and Spinoza. Exclusive Monists believe that the universe, the "God" of Naturalistic pantheism, simply does not exist. In addition, monists can be Deists, Pandeists, Theists or Panentheists; believing in a monotheistic God that is omnipotent and all-pervading, and both transcendent and immanent. There are monist pantheists and panentheists in Zoroastrianism, Hinduism (particularly in Advaita and Vishistadvaita), Judaism (monistic panentheism is especially found in Kabbalah and Hasidic philosophy), and in Islam (among the Sufis, especially the Bektashi).

While pantheism means all things are identical to God, panentheism means *God is in all things*, neither identical to, nor totally separate from all things. Such a concept, some may argue, is more compatible with God as personal while not barring a bridge between God and creation. Paul Tillich has argued for such a concept within Christian theology, as has liberal biblical scholar Marcus Borg and mystical theologian Matthew Fox, an Episcopal priest. See *Creation Spirituality*.

Monism in religious and spiritual systems

Hinduism

Hinduism is a primary proponent of Monism. In the Hindu religion, Brahman (Devanāgarī: ब्रह्मन् brāhman) is the eternal, unchanging, infinite, immanent, and transcendent reality which is the Divine Ground of all matter, energy, time, space, being, and everything beyond in this Universe. The nature of Brahman is described as transpersonal, personal and impersonal by different philosophical schools and the Brahman religious belief is just seen as different paths to the one God.^[1] This concept of Brahman explains the prevalence of Monism in Hinduism, because Brahman is considered to be all that exists and thus everything in the universe including the universe itself is considered a manifestation of Brahman.

Monism is found in the Nasadiya Sukta of the Rigveda, which speaks of the One being-non-being that 'breathed without breath'. The first system in Hinduism that unequivocally explicated absolute monism was the non-dualist philosophy of Advaita Vedanta as expounded by Shankara. In short, Advaita declares - All is Brahman. It is part of the six Hindu systems of philosophy, based on the Upanishads, and posits that the ultimate monad is a formless, ineffable divine ground of all being.

Vishishtadvaita, qualified monism, is from the school of Ramanuja. Shuddhadvaita, in-essence monism, is the school of Vallabha. Dvaitadvaita, differential monism, is a school founded by Nimbarka. Dvaita, dualism, is a school founded by Madhvacharya is probably the only Vedantic System which is opposed to all types of monism. It believes that God is eternally different from souls and matter in both form and essence. All Vaishnava schools are panentheistic and view the universe as part of Krishna or Narayana, but see a plurality of souls and substances within Brahman. Monistic theism, which includes the concept of a personal God as a universal, omnipotent Supreme Being who is both immanent and transcendent, is prevalent within many other schools of Hinduism as well.

Buddhism

Buddhist philosophy is generally suspicious of ontology. The Buddha himself, and some of his prominent disciples such as Nagarjuna, discouraged ontological theorizing for its own sake.

According to the Pali Canon, both pluralism (naanatta) and monism (ekatta) are speculative views. A Theravada commentary notes that the former is similar to or associated with nihilism (ucchedavada), and the latter is similar to or associated with eternalism (sassatavada).^[2] See middle way.

Among the Madhyamaka school of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy, the ultimate nature of the world is described as emptiness, which is inseparable from sensorial objects or anything else. That appears to be a monist position, but the Madhyamaka views - including variations like Prasangika and Yogacara and the more modern shentong (which is sometimes criticized as stating the existence of an absolute) Tibetan position - will refrain from asserting any ultimately existent entity. They instead deconstruct any detailed or conceptual assertions about ultimate existence as resulting in absurd consequences. The doctrine of emptiness is also found in earlier Theravada Buddhist literature.

In Soto Zen teaching, it is said that "All is One and All is Different." Since non-dualism does not recognize a dualism between Oneness and Difference, or even between dualism and non-dualism, it is difficult to state the meaning of this doctrine. All discussion of this teaching by Soto Zen masters falls under the Buddhist concept of skill in means, which is to say, not literally correct, but suitable for leading others to the Truth. Chinese Soto (Cao-Dong) master Tozan (Tung Shan, Dongshan) wrote the Verses of the Five Ranks (of the Ideal and the Actual),

which is also important as a set of koans in the Rinzai school. Dongshan describes the Fifth Rank in part thus:

Unity Attained:

Who dares to equal him

Who falls into neither being nor non-being!

Shih-t'ou Hsi-ch'ien's poem "The Harmony of Difference and Sameness" Sandokai is an important early expression of Zen Buddhism and is chanted in Sōtō temples to this day. Another poem of Tung-shan Liang-chieh on these and related themes, "The Song of the Jewel Mirror Awareness", is also chanted in Sōtō temples daily.

Other expressions of this teaching include the koan:

A disciple asked, "What is the difference between the enlightened and the unenlightened man?"

The Master replied, "The unenlightened man sees a difference, but the enlightened man does not."

and Dogen Zenji's personal koan, "Why are training and enlightenment differentiated, since the Truth is universal?" (Fukanzazengi, Instructions for Meditation)

Sikhism

Punjabi: "ਸਹਸ ਪਦ ਬਮਿਲ ਨਨ ਏਕ ਪਦ ਗੰਧ ਬਨਿ ਸਹਸ ਤਵ ਗੰਧ ਇਵ ਚਲਤ ਮੋਹੀ ॥੨॥"

English: "*You have thousands of Lotus Feet, and yet You do not have even one foot. You have no nose, but you have thousands of noses. This Play of Yours entrances me. ॥2॥*"

Punjabi: "ਦੂਜੈ ਭਾਇ ਕੇ ਨਾ ਮਲਿ ਫਰਿ ਫਰਿ ਆਵੈ ਜਾਇ ॥"

English: "*No one merges with Him through the love of duality; over and over again, they come and go in reincarnation.*"

Christianity

Much of Christianity strongly maintains the Creator-creature distinction as fundamental. Many Christians maintain that God created the universe ex nihilo and not from himself, nor within himself, so that the creator is not to be confused with creation, but rather transcends it (metaphysical dualism) (cf. Genesis). Even the more immanent concepts and theologies are to be defined together with God's omnipotence, omnipresence and omniscience, due to God's desire for intimate contact with his own creation (cf. Acts 17:27). Another use of the term "monism" is in Christian anthropology to refer to the innate nature of humankind as being holistic, as usually opposed to bipartite and tripartite views.

While some might say the Christian metaphysics are dualistic in that they describe the Creator's transcendence of creation, they reject radical dualism such as the idea that God is eternally struggling with other equal powers such as Satan (cf. Gospel of John 14:30). In *On Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine argued, in the context of the problem of evil, that evil is not the opposite of good, but rather merely the absence of good, something that does not have existence in itself. Likewise, C. S. Lewis described evil as a "parasite" in *Mere Christianity*, as he viewed evil as something that cannot exist without good to provide it with existence. Lewis went on to argue against dualism from the basis of moral absolutism, and rejected the dualistic notion that God and Satan are opposites, arguing instead that God has no equal, hence no opposite. Lewis rather viewed Satan as the opposite of Michael the archangel. Due to this, Lewis instead argued for a more limited type of dualism.^[3] Other theologians, such as Greg Boyd, have argued in more depth that the Biblical authors held a "limited dualism", meaning that God and Satan do engage in real battle, but only due to free will given by God, for the duration God allows.^[4]

In Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, while human beings are not ontologically identical with the Creator, they are nonetheless capable with uniting with his Divine Nature via theosis. In addition to this supernatural union, St. John of the Cross says, "it must be known that God dwells and is present substantially in every soul, even in that of the greatest sinner in the world, and this union is natural." St. Julian of Norwich, while maintaining the orthodox duality of Creator and creature, nonetheless speaks of God as "the true Father and true Mother" of all natures; thus, he

indwells them substantially and thus preserves them from annihilation, as without this sustaining indwelling everything would cease to exist.

Some Christian theologians are avowed monists, such as Paul Tillich. Since God is He "in whom we live and move and have our being" (Book of Acts 17:28), it follows that everything that has being partakes in God. Dualism with regard to God and creation also barred the possibility of a mystical union with God, as John Calvin rejected, according to Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Such a dualism also leads to the problematic position of positing God as a particular being the existence of which can be argued for or against, failing to recognize God as the ground and origin of being itself, as in Acts 17, or in the Hashem, YHWH, meaning "He causes to come into being." Such a view was called by Tillich panentheism: God is in all things, neither identical to, nor totally separate from, all things. This understanding would be further supported by that understanding of the proclamation of the kingdom of God, in which it is proclaimed "on earth as it is in heaven" (Gospel of Matthew 6:10). Such an understanding of the kingdom implies a new reality in which old dichotomies between, for example, the sacred and the profane, the temporal and the eternal, body and soul, absolutism and relativism, are overcome. All things are filled with God's Spirit (Epistle to the Romans 8:11), so that in this new creation God is "all in all" (I Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 1:23).

Eastern and Western differences over monism

Monism is a form of an epistemological idealism^[5], which from a Hellenic perspective leads to the concept that all is in and of the human mind or consciousness (*nous*). Therefore in some forms of Hellenic philosophical idealism, God is in the mind, of the mind (intrinsic) and not a real objective being. This is called a form of subjective or modal interpretation of God like the modal formations contained in Aristotle's *De Interpretatione*. Aristotle opposed monism^[6] and idealism with his own concept of reducing everything to a single concept (called metaphysics). The process of uniting (unity) all to a single 'thing' (*hen*) as a form of salvation is called *henosis*. *Henosis* teaches that man is God (in that mankind has the concept of God intrinsic to consciousness and God can be grasped by thought or rational contemplation).^[7]

Neoplatonic philosophy teaches *Henology* (via Plotinus) that the first hypostasis or the monad by which all things can reduce their essence, substance or being to is called *dunamis* (potentia in Latin) or force which emanated the second hypostasis an energy (*actus*) or *demiurge* (mind or *nous* as the creator) then the creator hypostasis emanated the soul or spirit. This reverses Aristotle's mode from Energy (act or action) first and *Dunamis*, force or motion second, making his Unmoved Mover energy or (*actus* in Latin) static and the second reality potential or motion.^[8] Each teaching a sequential modalistic manifestation of the material world via a philosophical "concept" called God (*theos*). Supernatural in the East is that which is uncreated.

Energies are uncreated and therefore it is critical to make a distinction between God and his Energies unlike in Pagan Philosophy. Since in Pagan Philosophy "energies" are Gods (Love, Wisdom, Intuitivism and Memory). Gregory Palamas in his defense of Hesychasm accused Barlaam of treating God conceptually this way putting pagan philosophers over the saints and prophets who through revelation and not logical thought came to know God. The knowledge of God by the Eastern Orthodox church is not arrived at by a form of rational theology but rather by illumination (*theoria*) as a stage of development in the process of *theosis*. Which again goes against the Roman Catholic theologians validation of theology using the Pagan philosopher Aristotle's Metaphysical and scholastic arguments such as *actus* and *potentia*^[9] to rationalize God.^[10] The West does this through what the East calls an incompleteness as a form of theology called *kataphatic* theology. The East does not use *kataphatic* statements about God to validate God since to use positive statements about God goes against God's very being (ontology) which is *apophatic* and therefore incomprehensible and not rational.

Judaism

According to Chasidic Thought (particularly as propounded by Shneur Zalman of Liadi) of Chabad, God is held to be immanent within creation for two interrelated reasons.

- Firstly, a very strong Jewish belief is that "[t]he Divine life-force which brings [the universe] into existence must constantly be present... were this life-force to forsake [the universe] for even one brief moment, it would revert to a state of utter nothingness, as before the creation..."^[11]
- Secondly, and simultaneously, Judaism holds as axiomatic that God is an absolute unity, and that He is Perfectly Simple - thus if His sustaining power is within nature, then His essence is also within nature.

However, the Vilna Gaon was very much against this philosophy, for he felt that it would lead to pantheism and heresy. According to some this is the main reason for the Gaon's ban on Chasidism.

Note that, at the same time, Jewish thought considers God as separate from all physical, created things (transcendent) and as existing outside of time (eternal). For a discussion of the resultant paradox; see *Tzimtzum*.

See also Negative theology.

According to Maimonides, (see Foundations of the Law, Chapter 1), God is an incorporeal being that caused all other existence. In fact, God is defined as the necessary existent that caused all other existence. According to Maimonides, to admit corporeality to God is tantamount to admitting complexity to God, which is a contradiction to God as the First Cause and constitutes heresy. While Hasidic mystics considered the existence of the physical world a contradiction to God's simpleness, Maimonides saw no contradiction. See the Guide for the Perplexed, especially chapter I:50.

Islam

Many followers of Sufism advocated monism. Most notably the 13th-century Persian poet Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Balkhi-Rumi (1207–73) in his didactic poem Masnavi espoused monism.^{[12][13]} Rumi says in the Masnavi, "in the shop for Unity (wahdat); anything that you see there except the One is an idol."^[12]

According to Vincent J. Cornell, the Qur'an also provides a monist image of God by describing the reality as a unified whole, with God being a single concept that would describe or ascribe all existing things: "He is the First and the Last, the Outward and the Inward; He is the Knower of everything (Sura 57:3)".^[14]

Another verse in the Quran is "To God belongs the East and the West, Wheresoever you look is the face of God.(Sura 2:115)".

There are many other verses such as Quran 15:29, 38:72 etc. which say that God blew spirit into man. It is mistakenly believed that there is an imprint of God in man. There are many verses in the Quran which indicate that He is the only Creator and there is nothing like unto him.

Baha'i

Although the Bahá'í teachings have a strong emphasis on social and ethical issues, there exist a number of foundational texts that have been described as mystical.^[15] The *Seven Valleys* is considered Bahá'u'lláh's "greatest mystical composition." It was written to a follower of Sufism, in the style of `Attar, a Muslim poet,^{[16][17]} and sets forth the stages of the soul's journey towards God. It was first translated into English in 1906, becoming one of the earliest available books of Bahá'u'lláh to the West. The *Hidden Words* is another book written by Bahá'u'lláh during the same period, containing 153 short passages in which Bahá'u'lláh claims to have taken the basic essence of certain spiritual truths and written them in brief form.^[18]

Theological growth and breadth

Many forms of Hinduism (including Vedanta, some forms of Yoga, and certain schools of Shaivism), Taoism, Pantheism, Rastafari and similar systems of thought explore the mystical and spiritual elements of a monistic philosophy. With increasing awareness of these systems of thought, western spiritual and philosophical climate has seen a growing understanding of monism. Moreover, the New Thought and New Age movements embraced many monistic concepts during the twentieth century and continue up to the present day.

Monism can be said to oppose religious philosophy altogether by claiming that the idea of spirituality contradicts the monist principle of an indistinguishable mind and body.

Materialistic monism

Materialistic monism (or monistic materialism) is the philosophical concept which sees the unity of matter in its globality. For the materialistic monist the cosmos is “one” and comprehensive, then a “one-all” made up of parts such as its effects. The matter is then originary and cause of all reality.

Notes

- [1] Brodd, Jefferey (2003). *World Religions*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press. ISBN 978-0-88489-725-5.
- [2] David Kalupahana, *Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*. The University Press of Hawaii, 1975, page 88. The passage is SN 2.77.
- [3] Lewis, C.S, "God and Evil" in "God in the Dock: Essays in Theology and Ethics", ed. W. Hooper (Grand Rapids, Mich, Eerdsman, 1970), p. 21-24
- [4] Boyd, Gregory. A, "God at War" (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 1971) p. 185
- [5] The Dictionary of Philosophy By Dagobert D. Runes Publisher: Kessinger Publishing, LLC (May 26, 2006) Language: English ISBN 978-1-4286-1310-2 (http://books.google.com/books?id=Z5g0FOsGwUwC&pg=PA93&lpg=PA93&dq=Monism+is+an+epistemological+idealism&source=bl&ots=mC6yqBtAln&sig=KJX0SxDIWkDyTRdNG4osImb0D1w&hl=en&ei=DgQqTI2ZG4H_8AbU8fXUCA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=7&ved=0CB8Q6AEwBg#v=onepage&q=Monism+is+an+epistemological+idealism&f=false)
- [6] The philosopher who holds that there is a highest genus with many species would be a monist about the number of highest categories (genus monism) but a pluralist about the number of categories. Aristotle, in contrast, is a pluralist about both the number of categories and the number of highest categories, since he denies the existence of a unique highest type. (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/monism/>)
- [7] pg 52 *The Mystery religions: A Study in the Religious Background of Early Christianity* By Samuel Angus Published by Courier Dover Publications, 1975 ISBN 978-0-486-23124-2 (http://books.google.com/books?id=3m6116Q-dRUC&pg=PA300&lpg=PA300&dq=Theos+ Smyrnaeus&source=web&ots=ml_CULK2si&sig=iDH41z1tQBg7IGxTEQplcPVwHo&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=4&ct=result#PPA52,M1)
- [8] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Aristotle's metaphysics- Aristotle gives priority to Actuality over Potentiality (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-metaphysics/#ActPot>)
- [9] "There was a very faint echo of Hesyachasm in the West. Latin theology on the whole was too deeply impregnated with the Aristotelean Scholastic system to tolerate a theory that opposed its very foundation. That all created beings are composed of *actus* and *potentia*, that God alone is *actus purus*, simple as He is infinite – this is the root of all Scholastic natural theology. Nevertheless one or two Latins seem to have had ideas similar to Hesyachasm. Gilbertus Porretanus (de la Porrée, d. 1154) is quoted as having said that the Divine essence is not God – implying some kind of real distinction; John of Varennes, a hermit in the Diocese of Reims (c. 1396), said that the Apostles at the Transfiguration had seen the Divine essence as clearly as it is seen in heaven. About the same time John of Brescain made a proposition: *Creatam lucem infinitam et immensam esse*. But these isolated opinions formed no school. We know of them chiefly through the indignant condemnations they at once provoked. St. Bernard wrote to refute Gilbert de la Porrée; the University of Paris and the legate Odo condemned John of Brescain's proposition. Hesyachasm has never had a party among Catholics. In the Orthodox Church the controversy, waged furiously just at the time when the enemies of the empire were finally overturning it and unity among its last defenders was the most crying need, is a significant witness of the decay of a lost cause" (Adrian Fortescue, "Hesyachasm" in *Catholic Encyclopedia* 1910). (<http://oce.catholic.com/index.php?title=Hesyachasm>)
- [10] Romanides, John S.. *Franks, Romans, Feudalism, and Doctrine/Empirical Theology versus Speculative Theology* (http://www.romanity.org/htm/rom.03.en.franks_romans_feudalism_and_doctrine.02.htm). . "A basic characteristic of the Frankish scholastic method, mislead by Augustinian Platonism and Thomistic Aristotelianism, had been its naive confidence in the objective existence of things rationally speculated about. By following Augustine, the Franks substituted the patristic concern for spiritual observation, (which they had found firmly established in Gaul when they first conquered the area) with a fascination for metaphysics. They did not suspect that such speculations had foundations neither in created nor in spiritual reality. *No one would today accept as true what is not empirically observable*, or at least verifiable by inference, from an attested effect. So it is with patristic theology. Dialectical speculation about God and the Incarnation as such

are rejected. Only those things which can be tested by the experience of the grace of God in the heart are to be accepted. "Be not carried about by divers and strange teachings. For it is good that the heart be confirmed by grace," a passage from Hebrews 13.9, quoted by the Fathers to this effect."

[11] <http://www.chabad.org/library/archive/LibraryArchive2.asp?AID=7988>

[12] Reynold Nicholson *Rumi* (http://www.globalwebpost.com/farooqm/study_res/rumi/intro_nicholson.html)

[13] Cyprian Rice, O.P., (1964) *The Persian Sufism* George Allen, London (http://www.rumi.org.uk/sufism/persian_sufism.htm)

[14] Vincent J. Cornell, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol 5, pp.3561-3562

[15] Britannica (1992). "The Bahá'í Faith". *Britannica Book of the Year*. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica. ISBN 0852294867.

[16] Smith, Peter (2000). "Seven Valleys". *A concise encyclopedia of the Bahá'í Faith*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications. p. 311. ISBN 1-85168-184-1.

[17] Taherzadeh, Adib (1976). *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, Volume 1: Baghdad 1853–63* (<http://www.peyman.info/cl/Baha'i/Others/ROB/V1/p096-104Ch08.html>). Oxford, UK: George Ronald. pp. 96–99. ISBN 0853982708. .

[18] Smith, Peter (2000). "Hidden Words". *A concise encyclopedia of the Bahá'í Faith*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications. p. 181. ISBN 1-85168-184-1.

External links

- Catholic Encyclopedia (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10483a.htm>) - Monism
- Hinduism's Online Lexicon (<http://www.himalayanacademy.com/resources/lexicon/>) - (search for Monism)
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/monism/>) - Monism
- The Monist (http://secure.pdcnet.org/pdc/bvdb.nsf/journal?openform&journal=pdc_monist)

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