**monotheism/一神论(Yī Shén Lùn)**

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Monotheism, the religious system that worships only one God, usually refers to Judaism, Christianity, and Islamism. Whether these religions are monotheism in the strict sense, however, is still debatable. Since the Christian God is trinitarian, it is sometimes seen not as monotheism literally, especially by Islamism. In addition, as Catholics worship Virgin Mary and other saints, it is also questionable whether Catholicism is really monotheism.[[1]](#footnote-1) Though often criticizing Christianity as Polytheism, Islamism is neither spared from such a critique, since there is also saint worship in it.

What makes monotheism distinctive, however, is not only the number of objects it worships, but also the way it understands the world, life, and ultimate value, as well as its deep influence on modern civilizations. Seen from the world history of religions, polytheism is quite natural to primitive cultures, and hence often develops independently in different cultures, as in ancient Greece, North Europe, and American Indian tribes. Monotheism and dualism, however, are quite special. Especial when combined with profound philosophical thinking, these two types of religion could be quite influential with the development of civilizations. In religious history, monotheism and dualism frequently interact with each one and even intrinsic with each other.

As the origin and archetype of monotheism, there is still some polytheistic and dualistic elements in ancient Judaism. The polytheistic element might be remains from ancient Near East culture, and we would not denounce its monotheistic quality as far as one God is the main object of worship. The dualistic element, however, is quite another issue. Since a major feature of monotheism is that the only God is regarded as the creator of the world, if there is a powerful enemy of God in the world, there would be serious problems, even though this enemy would finally be subdued by God. The serpent in the Eden, the pagan gods, and even Satan in *The Book of Job*, all need some explanation. The arbitrary and irascible style of God in the Jewish Bible, too, seems to be incompatible with the idea of an all-good Creator.

Both dualism and monotheism have their philosophical origin in ancient Greece. In *The Republic*, Plato argues that God is the cause of good things, and bad things have their cause in something else.[[2]](#footnote-2) The contrast between human being’s soul and body in Plato’s philosophy is well-known and seen in many of his dialogues. In *The Timaeus*, the good Maker of the cosmos creates it according to the eternal idea, and hence makes it orderly and beautiful.[[3]](#footnote-3) Not everything in the world, however, is created by the Maker, and there is something necessary that even the Maker could not dispel of, but could only discipline as possible as He could. This picture of creation already contains the primal form of not only dualism, but also *creatio ex nihilo*, a core proposition of philosophical monotheism.

Although Aristotle criticizes *The Timaeus* for its apparent argument of creation from nothing, his own theology has more features of philosophical monotheism. Aristotle develops a theory of prime mover in both his *Physics* and *Metaphysics*. This prime mover, unmoved himself, is the cause of every other moved things. He is unaffected and unalterable, and his activity is eternal, best, and most pleasant. He always contemplates on himself.[[4]](#footnote-4) There are some debates about whether there is only one prime mover or more. If more than one, a prime mover is the cause of a series of moved things. If one, it is the only God that causes everything in the world. When the Aristotelian philosophy is adopted by Christianity, the prime mover is understood as the only God that creates or causes everything in the world.

The first monotheistic philosophy in a proper sense is Neoplatonism, as exemplified in *The Enneads* of Plotinus, which integrates Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies into a systematical theory. According this theory, there are three divine principles: the One, the Intellectual-Principle, and the Soul. From the Soul comes individual souls, and then different kinds of beings all the way downward, until matter is generated.[[5]](#footnote-5) At the time of Plotinus, Gnosticism was already very active. Plotinus is vehemently against the Gnostic idea that the created cosmos is evil.[[6]](#footnote-6) This does not mean, however, Plotinus entirely renounces the evilness of body or matter. On the contrary, he regards evil as originating from matter[[7]](#footnote-7), what he denies is that souls could be evil only because united with bodies. Although Plotinus insists that everything is created by the One, and matter is nothing other than this world, he does not entirely dispel a potential dualism in the created cosmos. He suggests that the mistake of the Gnostics might be a misreading of Plato’s complaint that body as the inferior might be a hindrance to soul. This indicates that Plotinus himself is aware that Plato is the philosophical origin of dualism. While he himself tries to build a monotheistic theory, he could not be saved from a hidden trend toward dualism due to the same reason.

In the making of Christianity, Neoplatonic philosophy played a very essential role. Largely influenced by Neoplatonism, Augustine, as dualistic Manichaeism used to be his own religion and then became his major target of critique after his conversion, tried to make Christianity monotheistic as possible as he could. Different from the Neoplatonists, Augustine does not see matter or body as evil by themselves. Insisting on the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, Augustine emphasizes that everything, both spiritual and corporal, is created by the all-good God, and hence could not be bad. While matter is imperfect being and close to nonbeing, it is not nothingness after all, and hence Augustine could not see it as evil as Plotinus does. According to Augustine, evil cannot be in any sense. It is the privation of being and goodness. In the case of intellectual beings like angels and human beings, evil is a bad use of free will. Hence evil is never a problem with body, but a mistake in the soul. Only psychic beings could become evil. The fallen angels become evil because they are proud. Following their suit, the first human beings fall because they do not obey God’s commandment. God in Augustine is an all-good creator and a just judge, and there could not be any being outside of God’s creation and determination. There are conflicts between good and evil, as embodied by the wars between the city of God and the city of earth, but God is not one side in such conflicts, since they happen between angels and devils. Both of them are creatures of God, and their nature is good. The devils become bad due to their own free will. Powerful as Satan, he is not a counterpart of God. Augustine’s monotheism is the strictest philosophical monotheism ever seen.

Even such a monotheism, however, could not be entirely disconnected from dualism. Augustine seems to have wisely covered the dualism between good and evil under all-good God, but such a cover is not perfect either. First of all, although Augustine insists on the goodness of corporal beings, he could not be always consistent with himself. Quite frequently, he still renders body bad and responsible for evil things. The very division between the two cities betrays quite dualistic sense. Although the split of the two cities begin with the division of the two groups of angels, God is still the head of the city of God. The very picture of world history has a profound dualistic tone. Different from Plotinus, the Augustinian philosophy of history is a kind of lineal history based on Christian teachings, which has a beginning and an end. It is true that Augustine quite successfully makes God the only creator of everything. With the issue of the last days, however, Augustine could not make all-good God the only being when history ends. He insists that hell could not disappear and the devils and bad people would suffer eternal death there. He could not accept Origen’s apokatastasis or universal salvation, which argues that all human beings, whether good or bad, would finally be saved and happily stay in heaven. If bad people will be finally saved, God might not be a just judge; but if history does not end in good as it begins, evil angels and people would remain evil eternally. Is not such an end a dualistic one?

As Augustine is the founder of Christian philosophy in its true sense, this profound tension between monotheism and dualism is intrinsic in Christianity throughout its history. Many important theoretical debates originate from this tension, like that between divine determination and free will, between theodicy and predestination, and so on. This makes us question deeper into the philosophical nature of monotheism and its relationship with dualism.

Philosophically, monotheism features on the all-good God and an optimistic cosmos. As both the creator and determiner of everything, God has to be good. Since God is good, he also must be a good generator and a just judge. But a good judge has to judge between good and bad. If he makes the judgement indifferent and the evil unpunished, the cosmos again would become meaningless and hopeless. Regarding the origin of evil and its end, dualism is turned out to be more powerful. On the one hand, there is always some dualistic remains in monotheistic systems; on the other hand, dualism also usually yields to a higher place of all-good God. While both religion and philosophy are supposed to connect morality with cosmology, such a dilemma is quite understandable. The mutual dependence of monotheism and dualism is already apparent in Plato’s philosophy. Entirely pure monotheism or dualism never exist in history.

According to Eric Voegelin, modernism is a kind of revival of Gnosticism. Although quite some modern intellectuals claim themselves to be monotheists, under the so-called monotheistic cover, we can often find deep dualistic elements. Protestants especially show some dualistic features, although the dualism is inherent in God himself. The theoretical system that is closest to monotheism might be Leibniz’s theodicy. Similar to Neoplatonists, Leibniz tries his best to make God the only creator of everything as well as an all-good judge. With such a moralistic and optimistic world view, Leibniz took great efforts to unite Christianity again. Modern people were unsatisfied with such a theory not because of its internal flaws, but because it offers more order than cartridge. They need more cartridge to destroy the mundane order. Dualism could give them more reasons to revolutionize. That is why strict monotheism is not so popular in modern world.

1. Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1956, p138. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Plato, *The Republic*, 379b1-c7. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Plato, *Timaeus*, 29e1-31a1 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072b16-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Plotinus, *The Enneads*, V. 1, [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Plotinus, *The Enneads*, II, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Plotinus, *The Enneads*, I, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)