Challenging Preconceptions of Divinity

Through the lens of scholars of polytheism

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Abstract
The divine occupies a prevalent place in the Western mind when conceiving of religion. Many when first interrogating a phenomenon for religious content look for a god or gods by which to align their understanding of that content. This essay seeks to problematize any simple construction of the terms of divinity, and, by comparing three scholars of ancient polytheistic religions, offer suggestions for critiquing such constructions.
Through this comparison we can better understand how scholars who have dealt with "the gods" have understood the objects of their study. In analyzing both their approaches and their data, this paper hopes to suggest some starting points for a better understanding of the terms of divinity, and how they might academically be used.
In 1997 Alan B. Llloyd collected and published a number of essays under the title *What is a God?* The essays were authored by individuals who had taken part in an earlier colloquium of the same name. In this collection, no explanation of the title question was offered, except for a pithy sub-title, “Studies in the nature of Greek divinity.” Aside from being a rather catchy way to sell a book, the title and its explanatory accompaniment pose an interesting, though not unprecedented, question. The implication of such a title is that the scholars included in the work will pursue the definition of the scholarly category of “gods,” or the description of those things that we have at some earlier point labeled with certainty as fitting in this conceptual category. The book focuses on the gods in the context of polytheism, specifically the religion of the ancient Greeks. However, the collected essays fail to address “the nature of divinity,” as it pertains to either scholarship or the ancient Greek religious individual, in any definitive way.
If we are to ask after the nature of the gods, then our answer should be based upon comparison. We apply the terms “god” and “divinity” to numerous beings across numerous cultures, and our definition or description of those terms cannot be based on one god or one culture alone. For any investigation of a concept such as “the nature of divinity,” our method must be comparative, whether we stay within the uncritical bounds of defining the figures within a category with which we are already comfortable, or expand our interest to reflect upon the nature of the category of “gods” and how we as scholars are to resolve our role in arbitrarily distinguishing this category. These two potential paths of inquiry are better conceived as two interrelated parts of one academic undertaking, one that seeks the “nature of divinity” by pursuing simultaneously the comparison of the gods within and between traditions, and the investigation of our scholarly attempts to define the category of gods as objects of inquiry. In the context of the aforementioned book, we are seeking a method for comparing the data amassed by a highly diverse people, in this case “the Greeks,” for the purpose of formulating statements of a general comparative nature that serve to deepen our academic understanding of the “divine” quality, as well as describe in our terms the way in which those Greek people conceived of this quality. In doing this we may attempt to answer the question from either a scholarly or “native” perspective, but we must always recognize that our models for conceiving of divinity are those of scholarship, spoken in the words of scholars. To get at an academic model of divinity, we must push ourselves to compare the methods of different scholars with a mind for the context within which they write, and then compare this to our own context and the suppositions we have inherited from or about previous scholars.
The approach taken by *What is a God?* fails to meet the comparative needs of investigating a concept as broad as divinity. The picture of gods that this book presents is a hodge-podge, where the ancient Greek religion is portrayed as the arbitrary construction of a theology, as an afterthought, to explain a random cobbling-together of gods, myths, and rites. Thus the intriguingly warlike-nature of Aphrodite at Corinth is explained, not in the theological terms likely used or thought by the Greeks themselves, but as a necessary concession made to incorporate a foreign deity into the pantheon being propagated by the expansive elite Greek influence (Villing, 94). The essays are of a randomly assembled nature, ranging in topic from a highly general and indeterminate etymology of the word *theos* to the overly-specific attempt to relate anthropomorphic poetry about mountains to all the gods of the pantheon. There is no explanatory introduction, no acknowledgement of the problematic nature of the category god, nor any indication that a true answer is desired. The book seems to suffer from the desire to free itself from a comparative method that does not describe data with sufficient regard for specificity, while still acknowledging the value of the comparative analytical question and attempting to answer it by laying the facts to bear with no unifying model or theory to relate those facts to each other.

Looking back to other scholars of ancient polytheistic religions, we find a breed of scholarship that offers a more cohesive model of divinity, and ultimately a more concrete answer to our methodological concerns. Erik Hornung, Alain Daniélou and Jean-Pierre Vernant describe the gods through broadly conceived, general descriptions. These three have written to answer to the question of divine nature by describing divinity in specific contexts in a way that is applicable to a comparative survey of the topic of
divinity. What assumptions about the quality of divinity, they ask, can we discover by investigating the structures of meaning by which the gods operate in specific polytheistic religions? Each author addresses, through extensive and detailed description, the qualities and functions of the gods in their preferred tradition. In addition to providing rich descriptions, these three sources also organize and analyze their data in a way that they hope will reconstruct the universe of mental categories and conceptions that govern the lives of the devotees in each particular tradition. In the words of scholar of Egyptian religion Erik Hornung, “If [scholarship] is to count as egyptology [sic]… one must ask above all how the Egyptians themselves saw and understood their gods before even considering any question of evaluation” (Hornung, Conceptions, 30). To accomplish this stepping into the shoes of the religious person, these authors attempt to describe a cohesive system, providing a model that they claim fits their societies at large, though it may ignore or fail to account for individual outliers. These authors employ, to varying degrees of recognition and alignment, a structuralist methodology. Each finds the figures of the gods to be embedded in a structure of meanings that depend on cultural context, best understood not by the treatment of mythical data in a void but by the relationships of meaning that exist between the gods and other facts of culture. Each believes that the semiotic systems in which the gods take part are integrally related to conceptions of reality that are widely held by the societies under study. Each author believes that, because of this relationship, some shared conceptions of existence for the subject people can be grasped that would fit the understandings of many or all “insiders” in the tradition.

This is methodologically and theoretically problematic, for reasons ranging from the willingness of the authors to sometimes eschew the perspective of the common
worshipper in favor of elite sources (Hornung, 137) to their intractable insistence on establishing a semiotic system that is theologically and conceptually whole, despite the appearance of irreconcilable ideological diversity amongst devotees, which the authors treat as surface detail. However, if we can resolve some of the methodological and theoretical challenges of these approaches, we can produce a model that makes a relevant contribution to the academic study of religion. While it may be ultimately impossible to speak with the voice of the “native,” or simultaneously impossible to capture something so largely conceived as divine nature through even the most rigorous scholarship, the works of Hornung, Daniélou, and Vernant make an important contribution to modern scholarship concerning “gods”. Their conclusions, and the general models of divinity and polytheism that emerge from comparing them, offer challenges to other modes of thinking about the gods, and push us to examine and refine our models of divinity further. Though the agenda of the each author is specifically to fight the influence of monotheism that they perceive as having tainted scholarship on their respective tradition, if we can account for the context and method of each man and his work, we can begin to make their findings relevant to the challenges of our own times. These are comprehensive studies that seek not to catalogue and describe each individual divine being as entirely separate entities, with a life so very much their own that they become removable from the context of their tradition, but to instead order those beings into a system by which their similarities become more evident, and ground this in the context of the religious tradition within which the gods occur.

In choosing my three sources for approaching this question, I have made selections that address my concern for exposing similarity in a twofold manner. First,
each author that I have chosen has compiled data from numerous sources of different type regarding a specific polytheistic tradition, in order to elucidate for a Western audience the way in which gods in such traditions can be aligned alongside one another in a pantheon and share in the title of deity. In doing so they have attempted to provide cohesive models of religious life and mental categories that describe the system of their respective religion. To accomplish this they have eschewed the nuances of individual perspectives that they consider either not sufficiently mainstream or indicative of misinterpretation or lack of understanding of the specifically systemic nature of the religious experience.

Second, I have placed these systems for interpreting and ordering the gods beside one another in order to highlight their similarities. Thus I hope to investigate the category of “gods” from two sides. First, what makes a god a god in the religion of the ancient Egyptians, the ancient Greeks, or Vedic Hindus, and what is the common nature of the “divinity” ascribed to the beings that we identify as gods in these three systems? Second, how do the three scholars below go about reaching their conclusions about this question, and what should we take away from their efforts and their answers?

The authors below are highly concerned with the legacy of monotheism in Western academic discourse. This fact is readily recognizable in their comments and the comments of those who have reviewed their work. Oriental research reviewer Michael Fox notes Erik Hornung’s central concern for countering the trend in Western scholarship that sought to prove the existence of a monotheistic core of Egyptian religion, around which any polytheistic structures were thought to be later divergences. Sigfried Morenz is the most common target of Hornung’s arguments (Fox, 187). In the historical introduction of his work, Hornung counters Morenz’s theory of a core monotheism, and
in so doing reveals his own concerns over the influence of such monotheistic-thinking on
Western scholarship: “This is a grandiose, western-style perspective—but it has little in
common with Egyptian ways of looking and thinking” (Hornung, Conceptions, 29).
Hornung’s perspective, and it is one that seems reasonable considering the history of
Egyptology that the author lays out, is that the monotheistic argument smacks of an
apologetic trend in the West, whereby Egyptian religion could be excused and made
palatable by claiming that it was of a similar type as typically Western monotheistic
religions.

Jean-Pierre Vernant shares a similar concern for the effect of monotheism, and
particularly Christianity, on scholarship. He describes the history of the study of religion
as having taken two divergent courses, both guided by a concern with Christianity. The
first course was marked by a common evolutionary scheme that saw Christianity as the
pinnacle of religious experience and arrayed all other religious data in a hierarchy at the
top of which was Christianity. The other track was that taken by Durkheim and those
scholars who followed his lead. The Durkheimian track, from Vernant’s perspective,
developed a “reverse” evolutionary model for the purpose of academic study where so-
called primitive religions were at the peak, seeming to serve as exemplary models of
religion in its simplest forms; that is to say, the evolutionary schema of scholarship over-
corrected by showing too much preference for the “native” (Vernant, Mortals and
Immortals, 270). In the field of ancient Greek religion, study has also followed two
courses that have been similarly influenced by Christianity: attempts to see in the Greek
religious experience a similarity to the “primitivism” of religions considered to be less
developed than Christianity, or attempts to find behind the data of the ancient Greeks an
organized religion that tended towards individual salvation, universality, monotheism, and other traits typically associated with Christianity (271). From the perspective of Vernant, both approaches fail to recognize the value of the religious data in itself.

“Without going so far as to say that [the terrain of ancient Greek religion] has been neglected by the religious sciences, it must nevertheless be acknowledged that it has often been explored less for and by itself than in its relation to that which it was not” (271).

Reviewer Agehananda Bharati notes that the third author, Alain Daniélou, is concerned as well with monistic or monotheistic interpretations of his preferred tradition, Hinduism (Bharati, 91). In 1966, two years after the publication of Daniélou’s *Hindu Polytheism*, the reviewer J. Mavalwala writes, “To anthropologists of the West nurtured with the concept that monotheism is ipso facto superior to polytheism, the first section of this book [in which the author explains his philosophy of polytheism] should make provocative reading” (Mavalwala, 241). Daniélou’s scholarship is the most frequently or easily questioned, as there are those who feel that the author’s personal conversion to the religion that he describes is evidence of an over-affinity for his subject, and an excessive subjectivity in his scholarship. However, it is Bharati’s impression that Daniélou gives an effective and unintentionally anthropological account of Hinduism (Bharati, 90). If this is anthropology, then it is of a type similar to the structuralism applied to myth by Vernant. Daniélou draws from sources varied in type and in time in order to demonstrate concretely the system through which the polytheism inherent to Hindu religion functions. His goal: “a mere attempt at explaining the significance of the most prominent Hindu deities in the way in which they are envisaged by the Hindus themselves” (Daniélou, ix).
Put alongside one another, the works of these three authors provide a useful model for approaching the gods as figures presented in myth, experienced in ritual, and existing as part of the mental universe of the people of each of their three polytheistic traditions. These three exemplify a method of interpreting gods that treats those gods as formulas, existing for worshippers in myth and in experience, that dialectically inform and are informed by social perceptions of “reality” or “the cosmos.” The gods as formulas serve as focal points for symbolic associations, the pattern of ideological relating through which their semiotic power expands. Alain Daniélou describes this in his theory of symbolic association, which we will see below. Conceiving of the gods as formulaic figures helps us to move beyond over-simplified categories such as “sun god” or “god of war.” Through comparison, the data of Egypt, India and Greece prove that the relationships between gods and the conceived powers with which they are associated are more complex. We cannot conceive of gods solely as determined by the “natural” powers that they appear to govern; we cannot circumscribe their natures with such narrow definitions. Each author argues for the contextualization of the individual gods within the system of gods of which they are a part, as well as for the steady mindfulness of scholars to the symbolic associations of the domains over which the gods reign.

I will first present the conclusions of the authors individually, with respect to the uniqueness that they felt to be inherent to each of their traditions. As I elaborate upon each author distinctly, I can begin to pull out from each the pieces a model of divinity that they collectively inform and that, properly contextualized, is still useful today. In my subsequent analysis I will elaborate at greater detail the central points of such a collective model, as well as the challenges inherent to this type of scholarship and the implications
for studying divinity today. My closing comments address the relevance of these authors even beyond the boundaries of scholarship, as each was engaged to some degree in a conversation with “the West” itself, to which they felt they added a valuable and novel perspective.

**Hornung: Egyptian Polytheism**

Erik Hornung views the scholarship of the West as having always been troubled by the religion of the Ancient Egyptians. One of the more puzzling features of Egyptian religion to Hornung’s hypothetical Western scholar is the preponderance of depictions featuring gods represented as humans, animals, or combinations of the two. As an additional challenge, a short reading of Egyptian mythological texts leaves one with little certainty, as to which god is which. And how is one to interpret the use of terms for god, such as *ntr*, to describe the king as well the dead and the stars? What kind of divinity does the Ancient Egyptian encounter in the king or the stars, or more importantly in the gods themselves? The subtitle of Hornung’s primary work, *The One and the Many*, raises the problem of a divinity that is multiple, the descriptions of which seem confusing and ambiguous. It appears irreconcilable, from Hornung’s imagined Western perspective, that the god Re is the greatest god according to myth, but so too are Horus, Osiris, and Atum (Hornung, *Conceptions*, 187).

Many scholars, attempting perhaps to dispel the antipathy toward polytheistic religions that had pervaded the scholarship of the monotheistic West prior to the 19th century, categorized Egyptian polytheism as a pantheistic system, in which there is truly only one god, who can be sensed in every thing in the cosmos. So the scholars of the past
could argue that the religion of the Egyptians was at its core monotheistic. In response, Erik Hornung argues that the ideological system behind Egyptian religion depends on multiplicity, vehemently opposed in its dogma and myth to any urges toward pantheism or monotheism. At the heart of this Egyptian polytheism is a cohesive understanding of existence and the gods that is highlighted in Egyptian myths of creation. It is a vision of reality that the author feels to be a shared mental universe for all devotees of the religion.

In order to understand the fluidity, multiplicity, and mystery of Egyptian religion, we begin our investigation with an analysis of the Egyptian story of creation.

The first or primordial god “arises mysteriously” from “a world without gods” (Hornung, 148). That world is Nun, the primeval flood itself (66). It is a “dark, watery world” that is limitless and whole (168). There are no gods in this pre-creation realm (163). In that it is formless, this nonexistent realm shares with Apophis, the serpent that remains after existence returns once more to non-existence, the power of undifferentiated chaos (164). The problem of these images for scholars lies in conceptualizing the nonexistent. This is not, as has been postulated, a realm that is not yet existent; it is not the lack of existence, and it is not anything that will be ultimately consumed by the world that comes into being (173). Rather, nonexistence functions as the opposite of existence, with a reality of its own, and the Egyptians have a specific vocabulary to describe this state. “The Book of knowing the evolutions of Ra” states that, before the act of creation, “Not existed heaven, not existed earth… not existed another who worked with [the creator]” (Near Eastern Myths, 81-82). The nature of the nonexistent reality is undifferentiated (Hornung, Conceptions, 175). There are not two things, but only the chaotic whole. Nonexistence has no inhabitance and no living things or gods. Because
there are not two things, there is no object against which to measure distance from the 
one, and so there is no “space.” There is also no “time.” In this world before creation 
there is no birth or death because there is no beginning or ending to the nonexistent, 
limitless, whole state. The act of creation will establish an existent world that by its very 
nature plays host to all of these natural phenomena.

The creative act is one of differentiation. The creator god, androgynous by virtue 
of its association with the undifferentiated whole of the primordial world, is responsible 
for the first act that establishes two things. It “emerges” from Nun, and comes into being, 
mysteriously, without being created (174). Its beginning is the first beginning: the 
nonexistent state that precedes it has no beginning or end. Through an undisclosed 
mechanism, the creator god brings forth a pair of gods, male and female, and these two 
start the process of begetting yet further gods (149). Prior to this, the creator god has a 
seemingly vague existential characteristic, recognizable in the verb $tm$, which combines 
the notion of completeness with that of non-existence; $tm$ is the linguistic core of Atum, a 
common name for the androgynous creator. Because it is instrumental in the act of 
creation, the creator does not share in the quality of existence until it makes existence 
possible (67). All of existence is felt to originate in the creator, who sprung up alone from 
a world of nonexistence. Existence is born with the first generation of the gods, who then 
continue the process by procreating on their own, and so forth for generations (146). The 
nonexistent is a unity, and existence is the divided and distinct opposite of that unity. 
“The origin of the created world in a process of diversification, of the separation of 
elements that were previously united, dominates Egyptian ideas of creation” (171). 
Existence is the most fundamental, important nature of the divine. The gods exist, and
because they exist, they must be multiple. “This is the intellectual foundation of Egyptian polytheism: insofar as it exists, the divine must be differentiated” (176).

The Egyptian gods are limited. They are bound to be limited by the fact that all creation is limited: the existent plane is made up of multiple distinct and separable things that are distinguishable by their boundaries (limits). We can sense a linguistic parallel in English, that because existence is inherently delimited, everything that exists has inherent limits. The gods exist, and that is essential to their divine nature. Because they exist, they are bound by the rule of existence, and so are subject to time and space, that is, they are subject to these limits set upon existent things. “They begin with time, are born or created, are subject to continuous change, age, die, and at the end of time sink back into the chaotic primal state of the world” (165). The murdered and buried god Osiris is the most prominent example of the stunning mortality of the Egyptian gods. However, age, which appears conceptually linked with mortality, is also a limitation that threatens the power of the gods; the god Re was a trembling and feeble god who dribbled saliva from his mouth when Isis tricked him, according to one myth (154). There are numerous examples of dead gods, even the primordial creator gods who, though unborn, must have died, for they are thought in Ancient Egypt to be entombed at the city of Thebes. Hornung believes that, by the Ancient Egyptian understanding, the existent gods could not help but be bound by the limits of age and death, as was apparently the lot of every existent being. While their vitality far exceeded the vitality of humans, it was not limitless, and indeed everything in the cosmos was expected ultimately to fall back into that primordial water from which it was created—even the gods.
An additional limit to the existent gods is that almost every god only has efficacy over certain geographical areas (166). Egyptian travelers, for example, would often feel strongly compelled to pray to foreign gods when they felt they were no longer in the domain of their own divinities, and these foreign gods were frequently incorporated into conceptions of the Egyptian pantheon. In an amusing aside, Hornung tells us that “Portable statues enabled the gods to be effective at great distances…” presumably as manifestations of the particular divinity represented (166). These statues would sometimes be brought great distances to “visit” each other (167). Because they are not limitless, the gods cannot meet the criterion of transcendence offered by typical Western models of religion. “The gods live on a different scale and have a vastly increased but not endless existence” (169). That is to say, they are finite, in time, in space, and in power. Even the highly regarded sun god cannot penetrate into the darkness of Nun, or of the underworld (168). The creator god does not have endless power or endless knowledge; even the proper translation of his title, “lord to the end,” implies that there is a boundary to that over which he is lord (169). He is the first god historically to become “universal” in scope, but it is precisely Erik Hornung’s intent to show that this universality cannot be confused with transcendence. The quality of the gods’ existence does not attain a higher level, reaching beyond the existent. The gods, subject to the Egyptian conceptions of existence, begin to think and act “on a grander scale,” but still within limits (168). Throughout Egypt’s history the gods become greater in existence, but they do not move beyond it.

Hornung indicates that the gods of Egypt have strongly unique identities because of the Egyptian insistence on multiplicity. Syncretism, which can be a written means of
showing the inhabitation of one god by another and vice-versa, depends on this uniqueness. In syncretism, a unique kind of relationship between the gods is expressed linguistically by the appellation of their two names to each other. The most prominent examples involve Re: “From the Middle Kingdom on such links become much commoner; examples are Sobek-Re and Khnum-Re, and, the most familiar, Amon-Re, the new state god Amun in his solar and creator aspect as Re” (92). Such linguistic formulations as Re-Atum do not simply recognize the creator aspect of Re in Atum; Hornung believes that the Egyptians understood syncretism to express much more about divine reality than this (92). Syncretism exemplifies the uniqueness of the divine precisely because the gods involved in syncretistic formulas are not fused or equated (91). When Re and Osiris are joined as Re-Osiris at the end of every day, “Re enters into Osiris and Osiris enters into Re daily, and the combination is dissolved again daily” (95). There is no confusion as to the identities of Re and Osiris; Egyptian theology deliberately constructs the divine combination of syncretism to illustrate a relationship that is not union or equality. Syncretism is a coupling of the gods in which they retain their unique identities, separable at any time from the new form that is created via the syncretistic merger. Attempting to tie this phenomenon into the Egyptian understanding of the world, Hornung says:

“The Egyptians place the tensions and contradictions of the world beside one another and then live with them. Amon-Re is not the synthesis of Amun and Re but a new form that exists along with the two other gods” (97).

This in itself is an interesting reflection on the Egyptian “attitude” toward phenomena that Hornung believes can appear to the West only as logical contradictions, and given the fluid and mysterious nature of the gods in Egypt, the essential nature of the divine as
revealed through syncretism is informative to our understandings of the mental universe of Egyptians that the author aims to reveal. What marks the gods is that they are unique: the highly unique character of each god means that even the names, numbers and syncretisms of the gods must take account of the separateness and uniqueness of every individual god.

An interrogation of divine names illustrates another facet of the importance of divine multiplicity. Naming has power in ancient Egypt for its relationship to existence: the act of naming delineates a thing as separate from others, marking the existent nature of that thing in keeping with the notion that existence means differentiation. The ancient Egyptians experience their gods under more than one name. These names gesture toward the uniqueness of each god, as each name would appear to serve as an appellation that differentiates the god from others. Increased appellations attempt to describe increased uniqueness, but names, as delineations of the unique, do not bind the gods to more limits. Often names and titles are added to the god in the acts of worship and song (86). The most important title is that which expresses the multiplicity of divine names: many gods were referred to as “he of many names” (86). The claim that a deity has many names is a tribute to their power and the attraction of their person. Hornung writes that every name that is appended to a god enhances the reality of that god by calling to mind allusions to myth and cult (90); all of the names that are piled on to a god have a reality somewhere in these sources. In this way the god is enhanced by becoming more and more differentiated; effectively, a god with many names has an expansive quality of existence whereby their tangibility or importance is magnified by each name. It is the Egyptian “desire for differentiation” that equates the highly existent and differentiated gods with a
multitude of names (83). Yet there is always a final name that remains hidden, a mystery name. This mystery name alludes to another important character of the divine. Egyptian worshippers believe, according to Hornung, that the truth of the divine cannot be fully expressed or experienced.

The gods evade the limitations of total definition no matter how much emphasis we put on their nature as limited beings. They are ambiguous and mysterious, and the essential truth of each god’s identity is impossible for the Egyptian to ultimately define. The creator god is itself evidence of this. It is difficult to accurately identify the creator god by a specific name. While the sun god Re is most commonly recognized as the creator after the beginning of the Old Kingdom period, a number of Egyptian gods have the potential at any moment to be recognized as having a creator aspect. It is logically challenging for scholars, the author says, to understand that multiple distinct identities could all be recognized simultaneously as the one god responsible for the creative act. It is the Egyptian conviction “that it was in the nature of a creator god, whoever he might be, to have created everything that exists…” (150), and sometimes there is no name placed with mythic conceptions of the creator. We read in a creation myth from Memphis that “Horus became Ptah,” “Thoth became Ptah,” and that Ptah “is indeed Ta-tenen” (Near Eastern Myths, 79). Here, contained in one myth, we read that Atum created the ennead of all gods, or that Ptah did, or that it is “Ta-tenen, who brought forth the gods, for everything came forth from him” (79).

In Idea into Image, Hornung provides the beginning of a solution to this apparent disagreement: “The Egyptians knew that the event of creation could not be grasped by means of a single, simple formulaic principle. They recognized the need to find ever new
ways and symbols to express ideas that were essentially inexpressible” (40). This theme recurs continually in the main text from Hornung. For example, images of the gods range from the purely animal to the completely human-shaped “child on the lotus” to the Sphinx and other forms that combine human and animal features (109). The fact that these forms existed and were in use simultaneously rules out notions of their evolution as signs (113). The goddess Hathor could be envisioned as a cow, a lion, or a snake, yet none of these images, even in combination, capture her essential nature. “Any iconography can be no more than an attempt to indicate something of her complex nature” (113). The true form is not captured, but still hidden, and this multiplicity of forms expresses and maintains the overriding notion of the divine: the divine exists and is bound to be both multiple and limited, yet here we see that the divine is also mysterious. The replacement of anthropomorphized heads with objects in some depictions is another sign that these representations are meant to capture an aspect, and not the whole of the god (121). Hand-held objects and dress tend to be indistinguishable from one Egyptian god to the next because the essence of the god cannot be captured by, or limited to, such aspects (122). The limited nature of these depictions leads to a proliferation of forms, just as the multiple names of the gods proliferated in attempts to express the inexpressible (125). These forms do not contradict each other, nor do they suggest the pantheistic in Egyptian religion; by expressing multiplicity and mystery, the multiplicity of forms preserves both.

The mystery and ambiguity of Egyptian religion seems like a necessary byproduct of its unyielding emphasis on multiplicity. A multiplicity of approaches undermines any inherent truth claims that a single approach might take. Thus the statements that “Horus
was born of Isis ‘before Isis came into being’, or Isis herself is said to be ‘older than her mother’” are acceptable statements to make and have some truth (151). As noted above, the Egyptians felt that the created, existent world must be viewed in all of its multiplicity; any attempt to resolve apparent contradictions, or to see a unity behind the diverse, would undermine this urge toward the multiple from Hornung’s perspective. The phenomenon of syncretism expresses this, in that it represents not the union or urge toward unity of the divine, but rather preserves the separateness and irreconcilable natures of the multiple divinities. It effectively leaves the question of logical impossibility unanswered and simply “deals with it.” However, it is difficult to simplify Hornung’s characterization of the driving urges of Egyptian polytheism beyond multiplicity and mystery. Multiplicity serves as an expression of the mysterious as much as mystery appears, at first, like a byproduct of that multiplicity. In the words of Hornung, “The Egyptian solution is a paradox…” (151). The existent, and thus the divine, is both multiple and mysterious. It cannot be either without the other.

A useful, though overly broad, question at this point is, “What is an Egyptian god?” Erik Hornung devotes much of his work to showing that the multiple Egyptian gods have individual identities. They are not personifications of concepts or natural elements; they have an identity beyond the limits of any concepts that they might seem at first to embody (77). As local manifestations, the gods reflect the entirety of the divine realm, “as though it were focused by a lens on a single point in the world” (73). However, they are not vessels for one divine whole that can be entirely apprehended through their singular manifestation. Rather, the local, individual god-among-many expresses something about divine nature: because it exists, it is multiple and cannot be grasped in
full. In its local manifestation, the god is a focal point for interaction with the divine realm, and also marks recognition of the multiplicity and ultimate mystery of that realm. Hornung describes the gods of Egypt as formulas, and also as signs in a “metalanguage” (257). By this he does not mean a language that speaks of language itself as object. The metalanguage of the Egyptian gods is the language in which they are all signs, working in relationship to each other, to describe a content that cannot be described in any other way. In the case of the Egyptians, the content of the divine realm is known to be multiple, because the divine realm exists, as does everything else that is created. The gods express this multiplicity both in their numbers and their forms. It is the multiplicity of form that marks them as being fluid: the Egyptian gods are unique identities that are fixed in their diversity and cannot be endlessly reduced to a fundamental divine unity or confused with one another as manifestations of one divinity. Yet that unique identity of each god is a mystery that can only be accessed by the multiplicity of forms, titles, names, and mythical acts that are attributed to the god. The elusive core identity is a focal point to which are attracted ever-new attempts to understand it; no single attempt will reach a full understanding. It is only through the endless multiplicity of approaches that the Egyptians can begin to understand the divine, which is necessarily multiple and elusive. Hornung summarizes this divine nature with a metaphorical reference to the temples of Egypt: “The axial form of temples in Egypt is clearly ordered and articulated, and yet never excludes the possibility of continual extension and alteration…” (256). The Egyptians have a strong sense for the individual identities of their gods, yet these identities do not exclude the possibilities of increasing or changing manifestations.
Egyptians cannot experience the gods directly. The presence of a god is evident in manifestations, but as with the titles and the names, manifestations allude to the divine reality without entirely embodying it. Aroma is one marker of the presence of the divine; the Egyptians use the term *stj* to mean smell, and a literal translation gives us an interesting hint as to the nature of signs of the divine: *stj* is “‘what pours forth’” (134). Radiance is another feature of divine manifestation, in keeping with the notion of pouring forth. Radiance in the form of light, such as lightning, is a sure sign of the presence of a god. Additionally, the gods can be sensed in the reactions of men. The gods evoke rejoicing when the Egyptians celebrate, in praise or cult action, the creative act as a gift to the world (203). Human worshippers detect the presence of the gods in their own emotions. Adulation and terror are equally proper responses to this divine presence, and so when a worshipper experiences these strong emotional states in response to something, such as a cult statue, he knows that the divine is at hand. However, the gods also have a terrifying aspect: “a great commotion in nature announces the appearance of the deity” (131). As much as cult activity serves to praise the gods, it also appeases their more dangerous, potentially destructive natures (205). The spells of the afterlife are meant to protect the dead from eternal torture at the hands of the gods, who could make the dead into the non-existent. In this fear the Egyptians preserve a safe distance from their gods (207). Individual manifestations of the gods also “[partake] in the invisibility of the deity”; that is, confined to dark sanctuaries in temples, their idols are shrouded in mystery and darkness and are only visible and accessible to the Egyptian worshipper during special celebrations and festivals (136).
What is most important about individual manifestations is this: through worship and cult, the divine appears as one, in the form of one god who is unique, distinct, and cannot be confused with the other gods (253). That god may be the creator god, and may be called in that moment the greatest among all the gods (187). In that moment of contact with the divine, there are only the single manifestations, names, smells, radiances, or images. Even the local gods, whose dominions were limited to smaller geographies, embodied “the entire extent of divine power” (73). In any encounter, the one god could stand in for all of the other gods, and became the sole object of focus; this is generally termed henotheism (236). Equally in the divine encounter there is only one human, “And the one human being who encounters god becomes a single person who has no other beside him and embodies all humanity” (253). However, what remains in the mind of the worshippers, and remains at the foundation of Egyptian henotheism, is the momentary nature of the interaction. Just as the syncretistic relationships between the gods are temporary, and the syncretized Amon-Re retains in itself the separable natures of the deities, the relationship between god and man is only for the moment. “This divine and human unity is,” Hornung writes, “…always relative and never excludes the fundamental plurality that permits all other approaches to the nature of god” (253).

Danielou: Hinduism

Alain Daniélou approaches Hindu conceptions of deity by investigating the Vedic texts and the Upanishadic philosophies, as well as other key texts from the Hindu tradition, such as the Mahabharata. He seems to be investigating philosophical understandings of the gods as manifest, existent beings in a created world. His work is a
catalogue of the gods of the Vedas, and of the Upanisadic and Puranic literature that philosophically elaborates on them. It is worth mention that the author was a Hindu convert, a popular artist and musician who wrote hymns and was well-received in India, where he is still known today. The danger in using him as a source is in his personal attachment to the tradition that he is describing: it is sometimes difficult to discern whether he is elucidating the perspectives of others or elaborating on his own. Though his work is likely a mix, I will endeavor to separate the personal philosophy from that of the tradition itself in the following analysis. The structures that he describes in Hinduism give coherence to beliefs regarding divinity.

Daniélou sees in these ancient Hindu conceptions of god a similarity to other polytheistic systems. Rather than arguing against the use of polytheistic terminology, he attempts to describe an overarching theory of polytheism, apparently applicable to any polytheistic tradition. He takes religion as an attempt to understand and express a transcendent reality (Daniélou, 4). Treated as such, all religion appears to indicate that the transcendent reality is beyond humanity, and that this is what is characterized as divine reality (5). The author indicates that polytheistic approaches to the divine are marked by the use of a multiplicity of methods, akin to interpretive approaches to a sculpture. “We can look at a sculpture from different angles,” he writes. “We grasp its whole form only when we have observed the front, the back, the profiles” (5). Though the different points of view expressed in polytheism may sometimes seem contradictory or irreconcilable from Daniélou’s perceived Westerner’s perspective, it is only in piecing together the diversity of divine visions that polytheists such as the Vedic Hindus can attempt to grasp the divine whole.
The author organizes various attempts to understand the divine in a philosophical order, starting with approaches to the manifest world as the most accessible path to the divine “Immensity” that underlies everything manifest. These philosophical approaches and their conclusions are the formulae through which the gods make sense. Only with these ideas in hand will we be able to grasp the nature of the gods as the author describes them. Starting from the point of the perceptible world, “we are led to imagine that there must exist beyond its form, beyond its appearance, some sort of causal state, some undifferentiated continuum, of which that particularized form would be an apparent development” (14). There are three “continua” that appear to be the foundation of our perceptions of the manifest world if we follow the path of the Vedic philosopher. The strata of space, time, and thought, are the most basic perceptible continua, and can each be seen as undifferentiated wholes. In its absolute form, space is not truly distinct except as it is distinguished by relative or “imaginary” divisions (15). Time is also an “ever-present eternity,” or, as a philosophical source can be translated, “an indivisible rod” (15). Thought is also conceived by the Hindu philosopher as the system through which everything manifest appears to have come into existence; here we have no description of the unity of thought, except to say that the manifest seems to be the material result of an organized and unified plan (15).

Since thought seems to be the power through which the manifest world is made and organized, the next step in the search for a causal origin is to seek the “conscious substratum” through which each of the continua is made manifest. In order for space to be manifest, it must be preceded by existence; there can be no space without existence because if no things existed, there would be no object against which to measure distance
and thus no space. Perception or experience is the layer that underlies time; Hindu philosophy suggests that no time exists without being perceived or experienced (16). The essential substratum of experience is repeatedly identified with “enjoyment,” which is the most pure form of experience and is said to be the foundation of life. Finally, the thought continuum is only possible through consciousness. “There can be no thought independent of a thinker, of someone conscious of the existence of thought” (16). Consciousness is philosophically linked with individuality or the existence of self. This is informative when attempting to address the Cosmic Being, to whom I will return at the end of my survey of Daniélou, when we again interrogate the nature of a god in this tradition.

Attempts to grasp the divine in ancient Hindu philosophy raise the question of divine duality. Existence hinges on multiplicity: “that which is not multiple does not exist” (7). Yet philosophically, according to Daniélou’s personal logic, “A supreme cause has to be beyond number, otherwise Number would be the First Cause” (6). This is problematic, because the number one is a number like any other, and is unable to capture the nature of a reality that is beyond the numbers that describe a manifest and multiple existence. In manifestation, the divine must be multiple, but Vedic philosophy also states that the “Ultimate” that underlies the manifest divinities cannot be either one or many because these are but points on a manifest spectrum that, by its existent nature, must account for multiplicity (7). “We cannot say that [the Ultimate] is one, yet we cannot say that it is not-one, not-two, not-many. The expression selected by the Vedantists is that it is “not-two” (7). The nonduality of unmanifest divine reality cannot be described; it cannot even be considered real from the perspective of real, existent thinkers. From the perspective of the divine realm, all divine aspects and manifestations may be considered
“mere modalities of the same essence” (8). However, the importance of the multiplicity of the gods, as far as the author is concerned, is specifically in the irreconcilable differences between them. The gods are, according to the Visnu Purana, like the many notes played on a flute. The stream of air is undifferentiated, yet by its movement the air brings into being different notes, the differences between which make music. “But, although the different notes appear to be mere modalities in vibrations,” Daniélou writes, “it is in their difference, in their relation, that the nature of music lies; the oneness of the air, their medium, is but an incidental factor” (8).

It is said that the gods are ruled by the number three; in fact, we can see the importance of the number three at the heart of Hindu notions of existence. In the beginning there is only the nondual Immensity, the Ultimate object that can be said neither to exist nor not exist. The Immensity is the undifferentiated reality that underlies everything manifest. The moment of creation or manifestation out of this whole reality created the first instance of the number three. “When… the first tendency, the first movement, appears in the undifferentiated Immensity, this already implies the existence of three elements: two opposing forces and their opposition” (22). This triadic nature of existence informs Hindu perceptions of the manifest world. We saw earlier that there are three strata of existence, and they are time, space, and thought. Beneath these we again saw three substrata, and it appears in Daniélou’s survey of Vedic Hinduism that no tangible element of the existent cosmos can be reduced past dependence on the number three. Only the Immensity exists beyond number, and the Immensity is ultimately an abstraction, making it intangible as an object of worship or action. “It can therefore have
nothing whatever to do with any form of worship, or religion, of morality, or of mystical experience” (7).

The three essential qualities of manifest reality are cohesion, its opposite, and the balance between them. In Hindu cosmological terms, these are the “centripetal-attraction (adana), the centrifugal-force (utkranti), and their equilibrium (pratistha)” (22). These three qualities are the foundation for all of existence, and for the Vedic Trinity, which is one example that highlights the philosophical means by which the Vedic Hindu polytheism functions. Visnu the Preserver is the personification of the centripetal force, which is the attractive, cohesive, binding force of the cosmos. Siva, who is equatable in this instance with Rudra, embodies the quality that opposes cohesion, the destructive or dissolving force. Finally, the Immense-Being, Brahma, is the creator deity who balances the two other forces and is himself the process through which the manifest cosmos comes into being. His balancing of the two fundamentally opposing qualities of the universe gives him his creative aspect. “Though fundamentally distinct, the three qualities are inseparable and cannot exist without each other” (23). Thus as manifestations of the Immensity, these three gods and the powers that they embody reflect the necessary multiplicity of the existent as well as the inseparability of the reality that underlies the manifest. We shall return to each of the gods of the Vedic Trinity later in order to elaborate on this point.

The triadic nature of existence in manifest duality and the relationship between two opposites also provides a philosophical framework for understanding Agni, Soma, and sacrifice. “The universe appeared to the Vedic Aryan as a constant ritual of sacrifice” (63), the dual aspects of which appeared to be the consumer and the consumed. There
seemed to be nothing living that did not consume other life. Yet in turn everything that consumed was itself consumed, bringing forth further life. Fire, the god Agni, expresses the fundamental creative aspect of this Trinity. He is destructive, yet that destruction brings forth life. “The nature of fire appears to be the nature of existence, as well as its source and its symbol” (63). Because life depends on the act of consumption, Agni appears to be the fountain of life, or the foundation that makes living possible. Agni is a domesticated god. At a point in the legendary past, he had been tamed by men and taken into their homes and nurtured through feeding. He has the attribute of “wealth-giver” because he allies with humanity to humanity’s benefit. He is the means by which people are able to improve their condition in the cosmos; he represents the creative devouring that is at the heart of all existence. He is also the means by which the Vedic Aryan can communicate with the gods. As one third of the ritual act of sacrifice, Agni is the consuming mouth through which every offering must pass to reach the other gods. Because he is the only vessel for reaching the gods, “He appears as the most ancient and most sacred object of worship” (64).

The god Soma is the divine counterpart to Agni. Soma is the consumed, which fuels the consumer. Though consumption is the source of life and the driving power that perpetuates existence, Soma is the existent itself. Because everything that consumes is eventually consumed, even the consumers are themselves Soma. “The substance of the universe is spoken of as ‘food’” (64). As the counterpart to Agni’s spreading, consuming nature, the nature of Soma is “to contract and vanish” (66). He is cool or cold. Because he is the consumed third of the sacrificial relationship, Soma is equated with different beverages, elixirs, and consumables that are beneficial to life. He is a beverage that grants
immortality; he is a universal healer. The soma plant that shares the name of the god is the fuel for the ritual offering made in fire sacrifices, and, as an intoxicant, it has the ability to connect people with a divine reality. The god Soma is apparently the personification of this intoxicant, and is one of the most important Vedic gods because of the role that he shares with Agni in the sacrificial act. “Soma is represented as an all-powerful god, healer of all diseases, bestower of riches, lord of all the other gods, and is sometimes identified with the Supreme Being” (66).

The sacrificial act is the symbol of the devouring relationship itself. “The ‘devouring’ is the only permanent entity, the nature of creation and its creator” (63). Just as there can be no Visnu without Siva or Brahma, there can be no consumer without fuel, and the consuming relationship is the third necessary element of the manifest triad. It is said that Agni becomes Soma and Soma eventually feeds and is consumed by Agni, thus becoming him, and the relationship between these things is the foundation for the existence of life and the cosmos (66). As the relationship that binds two necessary opposites, the sacrifice represents the fundamental multiplicity of the manifest cosmos, and at the same time the necessary nonduality of the unknown principle that preexists manifestation. As the relationship between manifest dualities, the sacrifice is “the visible form of an all-pervading divinity” (63). The power of the sacrificial ritual, and the philosophical fact that gives the sacrifice its prominent role in Vedic Hinduism, is that it serves as the bridge of two opposites. Because it is itself the relationship between two distinct and apparently opposite aspects of reality, it stands out in importance. It is the nature of the existent, and the entire cosmic order is dependent upon and created by the relationship of consumption. “This alternation of Agni and Soma gives rise to the
division of the spheres considered alternately fiery and oblational. Such are the spheres of
the earth and the sun, and of all the celestial bodies which perform a constant cosmic
ritual of sacrifice” (66).

Because Agni is one of the dual fundamental principles of reality, fire appears in
different forms in the three manifest worlds. In the earthly world, where human beings
reside, Fire is the god Agni. In the spatial world, Indra the thunderbolt is understood to be
a manifestation of fire; he often replaces the wind Vayu in representing the active
principle in the spatial realm. In the world of the sky, Surya, who is the sun, rules the
other gods of his sphere as the “celestial” form of fire (81). Though fundamentally
distinguishable, these three forms can be combined so that one might imagine the fiery
devouring principle as one being. This is Prajapati, who is called the “lord-of-progeny”
and, as the complete image of fire, which is itself the image of creative consumption, this
god is considered in Vedic thought to be the creator of the world (81). Each of these
forms of fire has a special lordship over the other gods in his particular realm. The gods
are the powers that rule over the three manifest spheres, and among each of the three
groups of gods in the three different manifest spheres, that god which is taken as the
embodiment of fire for that plane is granted a place of prominence.

Surya, the sun, governs the celestial realm. “The Sun (Surya) is one of the three
chief deities of the Vedas” (92). Surya is believed to dwell at the edge of the manifest,
serving as the bridge between the manifest and unmanifest worlds, which could
themselves be seen as fundamental dualities requiring a third existent representative of
their interrelationship (92). Surya is another example of the power of the relationship
between existent dualities. “The sun represents the limit, the point, where the manifest
and the unmanifest worlds unite” (92). Because he embodies the relationship between the two parts of perhaps the most essential duality of the universe, Surya is again representative of the nature of the divine itself, which can be said neither to be singular in manifestation nor multiple in unmanifestation. He is described as “visible divinity” (93). Because he is the highest form of fire, he also takes on a creator aspect. As the creator he appears to be the source of everything manifest: he stands at the bridge between the unmanifest Immensity and the manifest cosmos, and is considered “the gate toward the unmanifest aspects of divinity” (93). His power is enhanced by his semiotic resemblance to the act of sacrifice. Both the sacrificial act and the sun are taken to be the bridging points, the formulas that express the relationship between fundamentally opposed manifest elements. The sun is also raised in prominence because his life is one of self-consumption, and therefore an almost perfect sacrifice and image of the sacrificial consumption that creates and sustains (93). Because Surya is “envisaged as perpetually creating, supporting, and destroying life,” he seems to embody the inescapable connection between the three cosmic forces of cohesion, disintegration, and balance (94).

We cannot examine the Trinity without a brief elaboration of the Cosmic Being, which is the backdrop against which the gods of the Vedic Trinity appear as manifestations of the constant cosmic forces. Vedic philosophy suggests that the investigation of the cosmos, which leads to awareness of the three strata and their substrata, is inseparable from man’s exploration of himself (42). It is implied in a perceptible cosmos that there is a perceiving consciousness. “The nonperceived cosmos has no existence and the nonperceiving consciousness no reality” (30). The cosmos is dependent on the perceiver for its reality, and vice versa (31). And the reality of the
cosmos is necessarily colored by the nature of the consciousness that perceives it; this is why man cannot question his universe without ultimately investigating himself. “His inner universe alone is really within man’s reach. Only by analogy with its own forms can the mind depict what lies beyond it” (43). That is, our mental definition of that which we learn can only be formed in relation to what we already know.

The Cosmic Being is not an embodiment of the universe, but rather a formula for describing reality as it exists in necessary parallel relationship with man himself. The universe over which the gods have power is not simply a physical universe. The universe that is identified with the Cosmic Being encompasses “the entire universe with its mind, its guiding energies, the laws which rule its development, and the consciousness which pre-exists its appearance” (42). It has a body, a consciousness, and an individuality that parallel those of man. Man and his universe are another existent pairing of conceptual existent things that are inextricably linked in a duality, according to Daniélou’s model. “Any conception we can have of man and of the universe is but a reciprocal reflection of one upon the other” (43). This kind of description describes a dialectic relationship that is informative of our understanding of all three traditions and the scholarship that describes them. The interdependence of meanings between parts of semiotic systems is a foundational point for interpreting polytheistic pantheons, for I will show that each author sees their respective pantheon as elaborating meaning through this interdependent relationship.

The Cosmic Being has three forms that correspond with the three forces of existence. These are the realms that exist beyond the spheres in which the gods such as Agni and Indra reign. The rulers of the three forms of the Cosmic Being are the gods of
the Trinity. The subtle form of body, that which is intellect, is the centripetal tendency that pulls the universe into being, and Visnu, the god of centripetal action, rules it (54). Siva, the god of the centrifugal action that is the opposing force to manifestation, holds the power of disintegration that pulls apart the manifest universe. He rules over the causal body, which is “unmanifest, undistinguishable from the substratum” (54). The body of substance, the gross body, reflects the balancing tendency of the Cosmic Being, and is ruled by Brahma, who balances the cohesive and destructive in order to create the substantive and manifest.

Visnu is called the Pervader because, as representative of the cosmic centripetal tendency that is always urging the universe towards existence and manifestation, he is thought to pervade all that exists (149). In the *Mahabharata*, he is said to “defeat the power of destruction” (149). Visnu is dependent on Siva, the god of destruction and disintegration; the two gods are interdependent as the two opposing forces of creation (150). The imagery of those things that are associated with Visnu is positive imagery: “All that in the universe tends toward a center, toward more concentration, more cohesion, more existence, more reality, all that tends toward light, toward truth, is the Visnu tendency…” (149). He is the Remover because he exemplifies truth, which defeats ignorance (151). In its most common form, the image of Visnu is described as having four hands, each holding an object that represents either a universal tendency or the idea of individuality (153). His lower right hand represents the Visnu tendency; his upper right the disintegration tendency; his upper left hand represents the balancing, creative tendency; and his lower left hand is representative of the notion of individuality (153). These are the four principles through which the universe is made manifest: the two
opposing forces, their balance, and the individuality that is the necessary perceiver of the manifest. The hand of Visnu in which each of these objects or attributes rests can vary. There are 24 different images of Visnu described in the *Padma Purana*, and each holds the items in a different order. These are “icons” or “avatars”: each represents a different ordering of the relationship between the four attributes. “The aspects of divinity ruling [the] various spheres of manifestation are represented in twenty-four images of Visnu holding their attributes in different hands” (153).

Siva is the Upanisadic name of Rudra, and Daniélou treats the two as different aspects of one god. In the Vedas, Rudra is the name of the god that embodies the disintegrating tendency, and the name Siva is an appellation of Rudra that means “auspicious” and signifies “the peaceful aspect of Rudra” (197). In the Upanisads, the appellation came to be the most common description of the god of destruction, and over time Siva apparently became the more common name used in popular religion, though the two are apparently used now “as equivalents” (197). As the centrifugal force, Siva is the opposite end of a circular spectrum that describes existence: “Existence is only a stage of an expanding—that is, disintegrating—universe. It is from destruction that creation again rises; hence destruction is the ultimate cause, the unmanifest origin, of creation” (190). Disintegration is at the beginning and end of a cyclical existence. Siva is strongly associated with the unmanifest Immensity, because his centrifugal force tends always toward the opposite of existence, and therefore the opposite of Visnu. As the source and end of life, Siva has two inseparable appearances: one as the active destructive principle that forms an essential third of the Trinity, represented in the Vedas by Rudra, and the other as a peaceful ending that, like the fire of the sacrifice, constantly
gives life by consuming life, represented as transcendent and calm in the philosophy of
the Upanisads as Siva (192). The active destruction principle is the consuming source of
decided, thus Rudra, like fire, is life itself. The Rg Veda therefore describes Agni as a
manifestation of Rudra, the fiery destructive aspect of Siva.

The color of Visnu is black or dark blue, and the color of Siva is white. The
philosophy promulgated by Daniélou explains that this is due to the relationship between
differing layers of manifestation. Every degree of manifestation is considered to be an
inversion of a previous manifestation, and so the manifest colors of Visnu and Siva must
be the inversion of the color of the principle that they represent (159). Since the
centripetal force is the white of concentration, its manifestation in Visnu must be black.
Since the centrifugal force is the darkness of the Immensity towards which it is pulled, its
manifestation in Siva must be white. The philosopher Karapatri also reasons that, because
of their interdependence, the two gods should be thought of as the “‘selves of each
other’” (159). As selves of each other, both gods share in an association with infinite life.
Visnu maintains the existent as the force that perpetually urges the cosmos toward
cohesion and therefore life. Siva, as the end of life that breeds its new beginning, seems
to also make death irrelevant. “Life only exists by devouring life. Life is the image of the
giver of death [Siva]” (192). In Daniélou’s terms, Visnu and Siva embody the two
opposing forces that are ultimately inseparable ends of a spectrum of existence.

That spectrum, the balance of opposing powers that is the nature of creation itself,
is Brahma, the Immense-Being.

“The possibility of a form, of a perceptible reality, depends on the existence of a ‘place’
where it can appear and expand, that is, on the existence of an oriented medium (in our
world space-time) which is the result of an equilibrium between two opposites, between
the centripetal and the centrifugal principles. It is a balance between concentration and
dispersion, between a tendency toward existence and a tendency toward annihilation,
between light and darkness, between Visnu and Siva” (222).

According to the *Mahabharata*, Brahma was born out of the notion of an individual
existence (233). He seems either to preexist the Cosmic Being that is the universe, or
result from the existence of the Cosmic Being; he is in fact a personification of the
abstract concept of the relationship between two forces that brings the universe into
existence in the Cosmic Being. The relationship, as noted before, is the heart of
everything, and its natural balance seems indicative of a conscious plan, requiring a
notion of individuality out of which Brahma is born (233). “It is difficult for us to realize
that it is the balance which is the real principle of things” (233). Once recognized as both
a source and product of the two opposing forces, Brahma appears as the creator himself.
One of his names is the Self-Born, because as the relationship inherent to manifestation,
his birth out of the unmanifest is the first act of creation, in which the relationship of
creation itself is created. He is thus said to have arisen of himself out of the primeval
waters (234). He also shares in the name of Prajapati, “the lord of progeny” which is the
source of life.

At the heart of the vision of Hinduism whose gods emerge in Daniélou’s text is a
theory regarding the nature of symbolism and associations. The author writes, “In the
Hindu cosmological theory symbolism is conceived as the expression of a reality, as a
search for the particular points where different worlds meet and where the relation
between entities belonging to different orders of things may become apparent” (3). We
have already seen in many examples how the Vedic gods may represent the relationships
between powers, or the powers themselves, which are understood to be inherently
inseparable from the relationships that describe them. They can act as bridges where worlds meet, such as Surya, the sun who exists at the border between the manifest and the Immensity. We can understand them in this sense as symbols of the fundamental aspects of reality, such as the different tendencies that create, maintain, and destroy the manifest universe. Daniélou therefore seems to take the Vedic gods as figures that represent or embody these cosmic forces. “The gods are but the representations of the causal energies from which each aspect of the subtle and the visible worlds is derived” (8). This simplification is an initial, surface definition of the gods given at the outset of his work.

To understand how the gods, in their philosophically well-defined roles, function to express reality to their human worshippers, we must also realize that numerous associations pervade the Hindu cosmology, enhancing the semiotic power of deities. The intertwined multiplicity of the existent is expressive not only of the interdependence of manifest dualities, but also of the common origin in the unmanifest Immensity that gives unity to these dualities. Because of the “common ancestry” of everything manifest, “There is of necessity some sort of equivalence between sounds, forms, numbers, colors, ideas, as there is also between the abstractions of the subtle and transcendent worlds on one side and the forms of the perceptible universe on the other” (3). The god Agni is a good example of this. As fire, Agni is himself red. He conjures to mind everything that burns or consumes. He is not only fire. “Agni is all that burn [sic], or devours, or digests: sun, heat, stomach, lust, and passion” (63-64). The god is one whole form that expresses the unity of these various forces through their association as consumers. Since he is red as fire, he unites the association of that which consumes with the color red. He unites all of the various forms of fire, whether the wild fire or the sacrificial fire or the harnessed fire
of the home. He is the locus of endless associations: the god Agni is the point at which all of these associations become associated with each other. Daniélou writes in his introduction to Visnu: “The image of a deity is merely a group of symbols…” (152). One way to interpret a god therefore is as the point at which all of the symbols that are found in his image intersect. “What we picture as the aspects of divinity are essentially the abstract prototypes of the forms of the manifest world. These must, by their very nature, have equivalents in all the aspects of the perceptible universe” (4).

Nothing is manifest that does not have a name and a form, according to the Brhad-aranyaka Upanisad (332). These are the two means by which things become differentiated, and thereby manifest. Because the divine must be manifest in order to be approachable as an object of worship, the gods are essentially considered to be the forms through which the intangible, inexpressible elements of the universe are encountered, and the gods are only encountered through one of these two means of discernment. “We can represent a deity through the description of its characteristics, its picture in words, or through symbolic elements of sound… Similarly, we can picture a deity in an image portraying a number of symbolic attributes, or we can represent it through a diagram, a geometrical abstraction” (332). Daniélou finds it useful to conceive of the gods as images because they express something about reality that is not otherwise tangible. “The purpose of the image of a deity is to represent, through a combination of forms and proportions, some fundamental aspect of the universe and its presiding consciousness which is not directly perceptible to our senses” (362). As images of the divine, the influence and prominence of the gods rests in the number of attributes that come together around them. If their number of attributes is great, then so is the number of allusions, of mental
associations between concepts, categories, and things that are attached to the gods. The
gods with more numerous associations seem to express something more fundamental or
important about the nature of existence. “The images which combine essential features in
greater number are the main deities” (363). Those gods whose aspects are imagined to
differ only slightly from each other appear as aspects of one of the greater deities that is
manifest in them.

Vernant: Greek Polytheism

Jean-Pierre Vernant’s concern with the scholarship of his time is primarily
methodological. The data collected by those predecessors of Vernant who were primarily
concerned with cataloging, without over-analyzing, the myths and gods of the Greeks,
suggests a randomly-configured, unsystematized religion (Vernant, Mortals and
Immortals, 272). This is precisely the type of data one finds when reading the
aforementioned What is a God? According to Vernant, studies of ancient Greece
previous to his own had a tendency to view the Greek data as occurring through
“accidents of history,” and did not offer adequate explanations for the way in which the
Greek worshipper could reconcile the apparent hodge-podge of gods and myths. To
consider the Greeks in these terms is to suggest the necessity of a comparative method,
since the implication of non-conformity to a preconceived standard is an assumption of
the typicality or commonality of certain religious structures (272). Yet a scholarship that
does not paint a cohesive and unified picture of the Greek tradition does not provide one
with the tools for comparing that tradition to others. James Redfield, reviewing one of
Vernant’s works for the University of Chicago’s History of Religions, felt that the
author’s method and mindset were “difficult to grasp” (Redfield, 71). However, Vernant seems to consider himself a structural functionalist in his interpretation of myth, hoping to combine the trends of symbolism and functionalism that he sees as dominating the divergent courses of religious scholarship of his time. He aligns himself with the symbolism of Otto and Eliade, the notion that, unlike signs, whose relation to their signified subject is arbitrary, symbols have some sort of natural relationship to their subjects (Vernant, *Myth and Society*, 217). According to this type of analysis, he also remains true to a functionalist agenda, focusing on the function of myth within a society, finding the meaning of the myth by the significance that it has outside of itself. In this sense, the true meaning of the “text” cannot be found internally but only by the way in which it functions in society “at large.” His work is an attempt to reconcile these tendencies.

Vernant employs metaphorical comparisons to linguistic systems in his analysis of the religion of the Greeks. The metaphor allows him to speak of origins: just as the origin of a word does not necessarily provide information about its meaning in a modern social context, but rather must have its meaning elucidated by an examination of usage, so too does he feel that his investigation of the gods must start not with their historical origins, that is the history of belief in them, but rather their reality as already-established symbols to Greek believers (Vernant, *Myth and Society*, 102). “Thus a word’s meaning,” and by his metaphor Vernant also implies the meaning attached to a god, “depends not so much on its linguistic past but rather on the place the word occupies in relation to the general system of the language at the period in question” (102). To translate the metaphor, it is Vernant’s perspective that contextualizing the gods in the semiotic system
of which they are a part is the only way to elucidate the meaning of those gods for the
religious individual. Vernant is a historical sociologist of religion, following in the
footsteps of Georges Dumézil, and his method ultimately depends on a notion that
religious systems operate like languages, both in the interaction of the varying parts
within the system and in the relationship between the system and reality as one of
expressing symbolically an ideological perception of reality itself (104).

The Greek gods as Vernant understands them are not best understood by the
particular concepts or elements with which they appear to the Greeks to be associated.
There are dangers inherent to associating, for example, Zeus with the sky, or Poseidon
with water, or to take any of the gods as representations or embodiments of natural
elements and read no further into their natures. The first danger of such an understanding
is the assumption that the conceptual categories occupied by the elements to the Greek
understanding bear enough similarity to our own conceptual categories to be comparable.
The second danger is that this assumption leads to an analysis wherein elements such as
sky or water appear as powers that are more fundamental to an understanding of the
universe than are the gods. The elements with which the gods are associated may only
make sense, if we are to attempt to place ourselves near into the Greek mindset, in light
of the association between such elements and the gods (Vernant, *Myth and Society*, 93).
In such a relationship of association, it is the gods who express things fundamental to the
nature of the universe, some truths beyond the perceptible elements the light of which
makes sense of experiential reality: according to the author, Zeus expresses a truth about
the powers of the universe, and the sky only makes sense as a part of experiential reality
in light of this truth.
It is useful to note that Zeus is associated with the sky, but he is also associated with many elements of the sky, and many things that are not directly sky-related (94). In this, Zeus is indicative of the nature of all of the Greek gods, as points at which associations across various levels of reality meet. “He is a god in the strict sense of the word, a theos, precisely because he is so many things at the same time—things connected with what, to our eyes, are completely distinct or even opposed domains: the world of nature, the social world, the human world and the supernatural world” (94). Vernant says that the Greek conception of the cosmos does not make such rigid distinctions between these spheres of meaning as our own, but rather orders the universe along different lines, by the different and separable forms of power that operate across, and are present in, each sphere.

The gods are effectively powers that underlie the numerous manifestations with which they are associated, uniting these seemingly separate phenomena across all of reality. The Greek system of the pantheon is therefore a way of ordering the universe by putting in order the powers that govern the universe itself, which are personified or represented in the gods. “Thus their religion and their pantheon can be seen to be a system of classification, a particular way of ordering and conceptualising the universe, distinguishing between multiple types of force and power operating within it” (94). Because of this, Vernant argues that the pantheon of the Greek gods, and any pantheon in any polytheistic tradition, should be understood as expressing truths about the nature of reality as though that pantheon were a linguistic system. The gods are symbols or structures that, like words or linguistic formulas, symbolically represent and express a reality that is thought inexpressible in other terms (94).
So Zeus is associated with the sky, but he is not the sky itself, nor is the sky confused with Zeus. The sky, in this example, is a manifestation of the power that Zeus represents and embodies, a power the multiple distinct manifestations of which are united in the figure Zeus. Certain features of the sky reflect characteristics that are also associated with the king of the gods. Because it is a manifestation of him, it appears at a glance to be a medium by which men can approach the god (95). Yet, interestingly, as a medium, Vernant argues that the sky serves as much to obscure Zeus as make him manifest. He writes, “…a power can only be seen by men through whatever it is that manifests it, but at the same time that power is always greater than its manifestations: it cannot be identified with any single one of them” (95). This points us once again to seeing the gods as points at which numerous associations unite, so they are figures that unite a multiplicity. Their power is enhanced by the multiplicity of their manifestations, because they express a greater unity and an increasingly abstract truth; yet the increase of the manifestations of the gods translates into both an increase in the number of mediums by which the god becomes approachable, and also a decrease in the approachability of the truth of that god as none of the myriad manifestations can, on their own, capture the whole truth of the god. Thus Vernant suggests that it is only through a multiplicity of mediums that the gods, and the powers and truths that they represent, can be understood by the ancient Greeks or by scholars.

Zeus is characteristically viewed as sitting atop the hierarchy of the gods and, as the ruler of his fellow deities, also atop the hierarchy of powers that govern the world of men (95). His association with the sky is an expression of the complexity of the power of his sovereignty: the sky can appear regular, ordered and just, or irregular, unpredictable,
and the source of hardship (96). Sovereignty is a power that can be harmful and beneficial, predictable and erratic. And the complexity of this power that is expressed by the sky is that, as a manifestation of the sovereignty embodied by Zeus, the sky can produce rains and winds in its moments of greatest chaos that are destructive as storms but beneficial as sources of water that nourishes crops (96). Zeus, through the sky, represents a sovereignty that is not governed by simple rules and is not locked into one course of action. His terror is not bound by morality, for, like a storm, his power unleashed can be to the benefit or destruction of human efforts.

As a representation of a sovereign, ruling type of power, that nature of Zeus that makes him unique is expressed and amplified through his associations with multiple naturally occurring phenomena. High mountain peaks suggest a point from which his command over the land can stretch. The tallest tree in a stand is associated with Zeus (96). He can also be the lightning or the rain, or gold, which is taken to reflect eternal brightness and is taken as a sign of Zeus’s positive contact with the world. Each association brings with it a title that Zeus takes on as he is manifest in the otherwise profane object. Zeus as manifest in the tallest of trees is Zeus Endendros; the aspect of Zeus that is manifest in gold is Zeus Chrusaor (96). He also has a host of epithets denoting his recognizable presence in the affairs of humans. He is thought to be the power behind any kingly human throne (96). He accompanies kings into battle, into the counsel chambers, or into the public sphere where demands are made of their sovereign power. The king is expected to act like Zeus, with mercy and justice, and his power is ultimately derived from the sovereign god who can be terrible and merciful and whose justice is not always visible. As the sovereign of the pantheon, Zeus is understood to sit
atop a hierarchy of powers that includes the state and family hierarchies (97). Vernant believes that this aspect of Zeus is indicative of a fundamental role of the gods in the pantheon, which is to express an ideal social reality and to reinforce the existent social hierarchy to worshippers. “So one of the functions of the gods is to impose social order,” he writes, and their presence is detected through the balancing of powers in the manifest world (98). “The Greek knew perfectly well that a king was not a force of nature and that a force of nature was not the same as a deity. Nevertheless, he saw them as linked, interdependent, as different aspects of a single divine power” (98).

The author believes that the Greek gods should be understood not as individuals whose features and actions are completely determined by their unique characteristics or identities, but rather as expressions of fundamental powers. “The Greek gods are powers, not persons” (98). The plurality of the gods is one aspect of reality, the only way of expressing the powers of the cosmos that cannot otherwise be expressed. Vernant describes the Greek worshippers as using both the singular and plural forms when describing their deities, indicating that they had some sense that the reality of each god was a united whole, and could be apprehended in singularity as well as multiplicity (98). The gods are singular focal points that unite various associations under the umbrella of the theme or aspect of reality that they represent, but it is the multiplicity of their associations, and not necessarily their unity as figures, that is their most important and recognizable feature as an object of worship in human ritual activity. “Homer presents us with a Zeus who, as a figure, possesses a relative unity. When a god is worshipped, however, it is rather the aspect of plurality that is stressed” (99). An example of this is in the multiplicity of the manifestations of Zeus. A Greek literary figure could be blessed by
the protection of two manifestations of Zeus, for example, yet still the object of the wrath of a third Zeus manifestation whom the character had offended. Here the anonymous Greek literary character is not concerned with an incongruity in his beliefs, because he seemingly apprehends a difference between the multiple and nearly-distinct forms through which Zeus can be encountered, but knows that these are yet multiple aspects of one unified universal power (99).

The gods are not transcendent: they do not exist in any way above the created manifest universe. They are themselves created and did not always exist (101). The creative powers before them are primordial energies that still exist after the creation of the gods. “These are Chaos, Gaia, Eros, Nux, Ouranos and Okeanos” (101). Most importantly, as expressions of reality, the Greek pantheon is described in Vernant’s terms as “an integral part of the cosmos” (101). Though created in time, the gods are essentially immortal (102). They are considered always youthful, however, the story of Ares is irreconcilable with this deduction of divine immortality. In Ares’s example, we can see that the gods are on some occasion in danger of aging. Vernant writes of this, “Then, certain gods may experience a waning of their power and their vitality as did Ares who was on the point of perishing in the jar in which two of his brothers had managed to confine him” (102). Having overthrown the old order of chaotic powers, the gods are not subject to their threats. They are not above time, and do not exist beyond its bounds, but seemingly their vitality is so potent that they would not be subject to old age or an aging death. The only explanation for the example of Ares seems to lie in the phrase “two of his brothers had managed to confine him.” It is likely that Ares was only in danger of
suffering loss because his power was being checked by the powers of other gods. This will be elucidated in the following examples.

The gods are powerful, but not omnipotent, and they are likewise not omniscient. This is exemplified in a story of the goddess Demeter, who had to search arduously for her stolen daughter, but ultimately could not find her without assistance. This assistance came in the form of Helios, the god who is associated with the sun, because as the sun he can see everything beneath his gaze during the day (102). His power was not one of all-knowing; he simply knew all that he saw, and his gaze did not penetrate into the night where he was not present. He was able to assist the goddess because he was a witness to the kidnapping of her daughter, as it is his nature to bear witness to everything during the day. He exercised no all-pervading knowledge; his nature as daytime witness implies that, had the crime occurred at night he would not have seen it and thus have had no knowledge of it. Helios also lacks the ability to see into the future; this ability is only held by “oracular” gods such as Apollo (103). This leads Vernant to the conclusion that, “The function of the god sets a limit upon it” (103).

The gods are manifestations of universal powers and truths, but the ultimate unity of the divine is in the balance of these irreconcilably distinct powers that the gods represent in Vernant’s model (103). The gods are often in disagreement or contest, and this is understood as representative of the opposing forces of the cosmos that cannot be reconciled, that act sometimes in conflict and yet that are responsible for the maintenance and sustenance of the created world in their various combinations. The cosmic order, which is established by Zeus, is represented by the gods at Olympus, who act together or in opposition for the continuation of existence. Though they disagree, they are kept in
check, balancing each other out as part of the divine order, and this order is mandated by Zeus, who checks them all as their king (103). Thus Vernant writes, “However, just as in the physical universe order depends on a balance between opposing forces… so the unity of the divine cosmos consists in a harmony between contrary powers” (103). So it seems that the most likely explanation for the story of Ares is that he was detained by the power of other gods, who were greater or stronger in some aspect than was he. Each of the gods has a particular but not unlimited power, and so, in contest, two were able to overcome the one. Thus beaten, Ares would have logically been under the influence of the powers that defeated him, which would have been able to threaten him with age once his power was diminished. Yet Ares is eventually restored to his place, and the cosmic order that guarantees his immortality is restored. Every god is necessary to the cosmic order, and represents “an authentic aspect of being, expresses one part of reality, stands for a particular type of value without which the universe would, as it were, be mutilated” (103).

As another example of the limits placed on the gods, we can return to Zeus, who is paradoxically a commander of the elements around him and a champion of his own will that established the divine order, yet still bound by the power of Destiny (105). Destiny does not directly govern the gods, pulling their strings like puppets and manipulating their actions directly through exertion of its own will. However, the gods are expected to govern themselves by the rules of Destiny. If they do not, the cosmic balance will be upset, and the consequences will be unfortunate. Thus in the Iliad, Zeus is not powerless to save his son, Sarpedon, from the death which is his fate (105). Rather, as a king whose reign depends not simply on might but also on adherence to certain laws
and appeasements of other powers, Zeus cannot bring himself to buck the ruling of Destiny that his son must die. His rule as king of the gods is bound by the same limitations of adherence to justice as an earthly king, and in his powerful non-omniscience, even Zeus must be wary of the powers of the universe and of his fellow gods. “Zeus heeds the warning and decides to submit rather than to spark off a conflict of forces which would eventually threaten to topple not only the order of the universe but also his own supremacy” (105).

Artemis is a goddess who exemplifies the multiplicity of associations that arise from placing one god at the unifying center of different structures and functions. She is the goddess of the hunt and also of fertility, and it proves difficult to reconcile her many varying domains as varied expressions of the one cosmic power that Vernant describes her to be. Artemis is typically concerned with places that are outside of typical spheres of human operation: mountains, “noncultivated lands that mark the boundaries of the territory,” sea shores, the cesspools of overflowing rivers, and swamps (Vernant, Mortals and Immortals, 197). She does not often enter into the city, the heart of civilization, but this is not to suggest that she plays no role there. She is also the goddess of the hunt (198). She is expected to look after humans in their childhood and youth, to be their patroness and guardian until they reach adulthood. The commonality that Vernant finds in all of these varied spheres over which Artemis has power is in her role as a figure of boundaries. Artemis appears to have power over, and to be responsible for, those places and times where that which is “other” comes into contact with that which is self. Thus the sea shore, which is an indeterminate and rather permeable boundary between water and earth, is one of her domains. The overflowing rivers and swamps with which the goddess
is associated “create a space that is neither entirely dry nor yet altogether aquatic and where all culture seems precarious and perilous” (197).

Artemis presides over the hunt because of the danger of the wild that hunting presents. In the act of hunting, civilized men leave the comfort and order of civilization to penetrate into the wild. Here they occupy an ambiguous space where they cannot assume the identity of either completely civilized self or wholly wild other, and where they are in danger of losing their grip on the line between these, and losing themselves forever in the wild (198). The goddess is the power over this boundary and is charged with maintaining the space between civilization and wildness. The goddess’s connection to young children puts her again in a role of presiding over dangerously ambiguous boundary zones. As a child grows, it is moving between youth and adulthood. Through their association with Artemis in their youth, children seem to be approaching a border between wildness and civilization: in their youth, their behavior is untamed by the socializing process of aging, and even their gender roles are not so neatly proscribed as when they become adults. Artemis shepherds them through the wildness of youth up to its border with civilized adulthood, over which she is the protecting patron goddess (199). War and battle parallel the hunt as well, and are associated through the worship of Artemis with hunting as acts of almost inhuman violence that threaten, if taken to excess, to strip away civility and order and plunge their participants irrevocably into inhuman wildness. Therefore the goddess is asked to intervene when excess of violence are employed on the battlefield. As an interesting marker of the goddess who maintains the boundaries and protects those who perilously cross them, Artemis’s intervention in such battlefield scenarios blinds the transgressor and clarifies the sight of the victim. By Vernant’s interpretation of such an
intervention, “In the first case, she effaces and confuses the boundaries, whether in nature or in the mind, while in the second, just when the boundaries are obscured, she allows her favorites to discern their outline” (203).

Vernant believes that the Greek gods only make sense in light of philosophical, botanical, social and other conceptual associations that they brought to mind to the Greeks themselves, and that these conceptual codes are highlighted by the interactions of the gods with their associations in the Greek system (Vernant, *Myth and Society*, 133). The “meaning” of a god such as Adonis can only be grasped by an analysis of the various codes that swirl around him and inform ancient Greek mental associations. Adonis is in fact a useful example of the complexity of associations that surround a god. The god is associated with myrrh. His story brings with it associations with the ritual sacrifice, where spice and myrrh are the share of the gods in a ritual meal. Humans consume the flesh, but the gods take smoke, “the smell of perfumes, and incorruptible spices” (135). In this context, Adonis’ association with myrrh represents both a bridge between gods and men, and, by mediating the gap between humanity and the divine and thus reinforcing this difference, it represents the “inaccessible character of the divine” (136). In the realm of marriage, however, myrrh is considered among the Greeks to be an aphrodisiac that brings together the opposite sexes. Here myrrh does not act as a bridge across a vertical axis but a horizontal one. The spice is powerful and also dangerous, in that it could lead to an intoxication with seduction that would undermine marriage by encouraging too much union between the sexes: affairs, debauchery, and other destructions of the social institution of marriage (136).
Marriage and sacrifice are not unrelated acts in the Greek understanding that Vernant seeks. “You could say that marriage is to sexual consummation what sacrifice is to the consumption of meat: both assure continuity of existence to mankind” and make civil the respective acts of eating and sex, which are otherwise indistinguishable from the acts of wild animals (138). The proof of the relationship between marriage and sacrifice is in another goddess, Demeter, who is the goddess of the cereal plants. She is the patroness of marriage. Because of the Greek understanding of civility as a balancing of opposed and otherwise uncivil forces, cereals are the type of plant that is commonly associated with civilization. They are the proper balance of the “dry and wet” principles, and because they are harvested they appear to be accessible only to the civilized, and only to humans (133). Demeter, presiding over this symbol of civilization, is the natural candidate for guarding marriage, wherein the otherwise uncivilized sexual union that balances male and female is itself balanced, so that it does not reach toward metaphorically hot or dry excesses. The proper wife, for example, lives in the balanced space between renouncing sexuality and living a life of excessive sexual activity, thus guaranteeing the stability of the home and the furtherance of families (139).

Since what is desirable to the hypothetical ancient Greek is the perpetuation of civilization and the social order through a balancing of opposing extremes, the meaning of the story of Adonis can emerge after this brief overview of the Demeter principle and the symbolic associations of sacrifice and marriage. Adonis is born from myrrh: his mother, Myrrha, had initially lived too far to the extreme of celibacy, which is rigid devotion to the goddess Artemis. Aphrodite, Artemis’s wild opposite who embodies lustful attraction in this situation, punished Myrrha by cursing her to be unmovingly
attracted to her own father. Adonis was born of this incestuous coupling of Myrrha and her father, and so the god was ultimately a product and embodiment of the destructive qualities of excesses related to marriage. He was sexually active and lived the lifestyle of Aphrodite at an early age, when he should have been more rigidly adherent to the demands of Artemis, the patroness of youth. Then when it became time to participate in the balancing act of marriage, he died. Myrrha was turned into a myrrh tree (141). Upon Adonis’ death, he was found or placed in a bed of lettuce, which is the wet and earthy opposite of myrrh in the Greek conceptual classificatory system (142). So Vernant, here paraphrasing the interpretation of Detienne, thinks that Adonis’ story makes sense only in light of the poles of conceptual opposition between which the god moves. The god’s ultimate impotence and death are a result of excesses in both directions away from the civilized balance, and the author takes the meaning of the story to be based upon understandings of marriage as a part of the social fabric that maintains the social and cosmic order. “In this way we discover that the body of evidence is based upon a series of oppositions linked with one another… these terms, which are at times united and brought together through intermediaries and at others set apart and mutually exclusive, are organised in a coherent system” (134). The meaning of the gods to the Greeks can only be grasped in light of their relationships to these conceptual systems.

The gods are described in imagery suggesting that they have a body (Vernant, Mortals and Immortals, 28). They hear, see, and are “abundantly endowed” with a capacity for thought, indicating that they may possess organs that make this possible (29). It is problematic to view the gods as having bodies because this implies a similarity to the human body, and the bodies of the gods are often described in surprisingly human terms.
However, their bodies as divine beings are different from human bodies. The gods do not require the same organs that humans and other animals use in order to think, see, hear or move (29). As much as the body of a god may act in similar ways and be described with similar features as a human body, the body of the god remains immortal and is not subject to human limitations. The existent gods are not subject to human laws, and their bodies are indicative of the impassable boundary between the human and divine worlds (31). They are described as *hoi aei ontes*, “those who exist forever,” which suggests that they are immortal, although we have already noted above the difference between this eternal life and an eternal existence that pre-exists the rest of the cosmos (footnote, 32).

According to Greek myth, the world originated in darkness and Chaos, “the original Chasm, the dark, primordial Abyss that existed before anything had form, solidarity, or foundation” (33). In the ancient Greek cosmology, this chaos still permeates the world at its fringes, and can be detected in sleep and in death, where that which has form and vitality is worn down. The chaos on the fringes of existence is associated with fatigue (33). Symbolically it appears to be the opposite of that vitality which it exhausts, the opposite of the life that humans find in themselves, and so the human body appears conceptually as a place wherein the inextricably linked, yet fundamentally opposed forces of existence and chaos meet. Examples of this include the transition from youth to old age, where just as one reaches the prime of their vitality they seem to already be approaching a decrease in it. The reward of hard physical labor also exemplifies a meeting of these two forces, as the human body that is built up and feels its own vitality in the exertion of its power is left feeling weary, having only sensed the full breadth of its life energy in the expenditure of it (33). Though the original chaos seems to permeate the
existent world on the fringes of every vital activity and thing, it has no place in the realm of the gods (33).

Vernant believes the human body to be a “point of departure” for conceptions of the bodies of the gods: humans can seem only to understand the bodies of the gods through reflection upon their own corporeal forms, which necessarily appear to be poorer reflections of the gods’ bodies, which must be perfect (34). For example, blood, which is one of the vital fluids in the human body, essential to the life of the person, seems to be a vessel for the vitality and vigor of life. Therefore, the gods, who have endless life, must also have some kind of blood of their own, which would fuel them with endless vitality and vigor (34). The gods, having blood, are sometimes said to bleed. “Since the gods bleed, one must admit that their bodies have blood in them, but it must be added immediately that this is so only on the condition that this blood is not really blood, since death, the other side of life, is not present in it” (34). A bleeding god does not bring to mind any of the associations of a bleeding human. Whereas a bleeding human appears to be losing their vital essence, and thus expressing the opposed tendency of decay that leads to death, an immortal god cannot be said to lose any of its vitality in a loss of blood. The human body is subject to the power of diminution, of chaos; however, this has no place in the body of a god.

On their bodies, the gods carry or wear various objects that, the author suggests, we should understand as expressions of their natural power. They hold or wear them because they are the masters and the sources of the powers that the items suggest. Vernant writes, “…all these precious objects are efficacious symbols of powers held, of functions exercised” (38). Divine paraphernalia, such as the thunderbolt that Zeus holds
in his hand, is an extension of the body of the god. It expresses a characteristic of the god, something about his power and its meanings. It is as much a part of the body as are the limbs, as the power that is inherent to the divine individual can be exercised through the object just as physical force can be exercised through the parts of the body. The gods are individuals, separable from each other, and their bodies are functions of that individuality. The bodies of the gods serve as collection points for specific characteristics, exemplified in their paraphernalia, and each of these characteristics in the physical description takes the place of a title or a name (47). Just as the human body sets the worshipper apart from the world around him and marks him as a class of distinct being, so the concept of divine bodies sets the gods apart from each other and from the divine realm that they inhabit.

In the mythic data upon which Vernant draws, the gods seem to control whether they are visible to human worshippers. They can sometimes obscure human views with an emanation, such as a cloud (42). They can also make themselves appear in a human form that hides their true identity (43). When they are hidden in any way, they can be detected only indirectly through the emanations that give away their presence. In the story of Ajax, Poseidon hides himself by assuming the form of a human that is known to his audience, yet he gives off a discernable aura, not one that is necessarily visible or detectable by the physical senses, but rather one that can be perceived by the mind’s eye (43). Visible manifestations of the gods do not reflect their true natures. In their true forms the gods are thought to be blindingly brilliant and beautiful; there are numerous examples from Acteon to Tiresias of humans who have lost their sight or their life after seeing the true form of a god (44). Vernant describes this as a paradox: in order to be
approachable and detectable, the gods must hide their true forms (45). The manifest is the
only form by which humans can comprehend their divinities, yet this manifestation
cannot be allowed to completely capture the essential form of the god. Because the gods
cannot be understood directly they take on a large number of varied forms (45). Thus,
“As boy or woman, Athena’s visible body fails equally to express what the goddess
authentically is” (45).

The gods dwell in the sky, and also are masters of distinct realms. For example
Poseidon is lord over the waters, and Artemis is the huntress who is master of the wild.
Because the meaning of the gods is not fully captured in their manifestations, they are
able to overcome the limitations of highly specialized, proscribed existences. Vernant
suggests that the gods are both capable of existing in multiple places at the same time,
and still limited to geographical restrictions. He writes, “The gods are here [on earth] and
there [at Olympus] at the same time” (46). In the examples of Zeus above, it appears that
his presence can be detected in numerous places simultaneously, and that for the believer
who has appeased two forms of Zeus yet fears a third, the multiple aspects of the god’s
power can be experienced simultaneously as near-distinct entities that are united by their
association with the conceptually singular Zeus. In this quote then Vernant seems to refer
to the difference between a manifestation and a true form. The true forms of the gods,
their true natures that cannot be revealed, seem mostly to stay in the sky, at their home
atop Olympus, unless specifically manifest in hiding on earth. Their manifestations
reflect only aspects of them as polyvalent powers, so it could be said that the “whole”
god is not present in a manifestation. However, Vernant also writes that the gods can
travel “at a speed as swift as thought,” indicating that they are subject to the limitation of
distance within space, although they nearly overcome it (46). The gods do not exist “above” existent space, so it would be unfair to say that they could be everywhere at once since they are not truly transcendent beings. Yet they are not constrained by the limitations of distance that would govern human lives, and their un-manifest selves appear to exist in multiple places at once.

At the end of his essay concerning divine bodies, Vernant uses the term “individual identity” to describe the aspect of particularity that applies to each of the gods of the Greek pantheon (47). They must be separable, distinct in some way from each other because they represent unique powers that cannot be reconciled under one conceptual umbrella. Here at last we get a hint of the cosmological myth that establishes and helps explain the multiplicity of the gods, and why this multiplicity is important. The value of the multiplicity of the gods is understood as integrally related to the ordering of the cosmos, as exemplified in the *Theogony* of Hesiod. When Zeus, born of Chaos and its fellow ambiguous, quasi-undifferentiated powers, comes to control the cosmos, he orders his fellow gods systematically into proscribed roles that are more rigid than the fluid roles of the powers of Chaos that preceded them (48). It is the order that Zeus establishes and maintains that provides for the balance of the cosmos: his just rule is a means of checking and balancing powers that are sometimes opposed and yet must work together in a unified system to maintain the ordered cosmos. What this suggests to the Greek thinker is that diversity and multiplicity are to order what ambiguous unity and lack of differentiation are to chaos (48). An ordered cosmos must have multiple independent powers as parts, which become interdependent through their balanced ordering. How can you delineate and order but one thing?
Summary Analysis

When set down beside each other, what do these three theorists tell us about the nature of a god in a polytheistic system? One of the most important divine aspects to be addressed is the aspect of multiplicity itself. For my purposes, it seems most fruitful to attempt an answer to the question of divine nature by placing side-by-side a great number of beings who have a share in the quality “divinity” according to the supposition of scholars who apply the same term, “god,” to each; polytheism brings to the table the largest numbers of beings held simultaneously to fit into the category of “gods,” in the minds of both the religious person and the scholar. Though addressing a large number of gods serves the purposes of this study, each author that I have chosen feels that the multiplicity inherent in polytheism has proven a daunting challenge to Western scholarship, tainted as they feel that scholarship is by monotheistic ways of thought. When we apply the work of these authors to the challenges of today, we find that we are on a similar footing with regards to conceptions of “god.” When constructing the category of “god” for an academic purpose, what figures from myth fit in that category? We may translate the words of another language and think that the linguistic equivalent of “god” is similar enough to our own category, and reflects sufficiently the perspective of the original devotee, that figures thus labeled can be assumed to be comparable. The three authors I have studied here serve to remind us of the limitations of cross-cultural comparability. We would be wrong, they suggest, in making any assumptions about a “god of the sky” until we accounted for the conceptual associations and multifarious
meanings of “sky.” How much more would we miss the mark if we took for granted the conceptual category of “god”?

Yet we cannot very well begin describing the subject of our academic inquiry until we are clear as to the boundaries of the category that we take that subject to be. Can we only delineate the boundaries of the category “gods” by comparing those figures that we already know to be gods? The Egyptians recognized, according to Hornung, that existent things such as the gods could only be recognized as unique and existent by their contrast to those things that they were not. In the same way, any attempt to establish the limitations of what we mean by the term “god” must come up against our preconceived notions of what is divine and what is not. There appear very few reasonable alternatives. The three authors above challenge our preconceptions by blurring the lines between the human and the divine. They recognize that the gods as fundamental realities that cannot be totally defined, by either the scholar or the religion person. The divine evades rigid description because it is one category, one part of a semiotic system that is open to change and fluidity. This basis for understanding “the gods” as conceptual category can be of great benefit to our academic construction of the divine category. We could always fall back on the words of the religious themselves, and take anything that is called a god to be so. This would not be the preferred approach for my three authors, who favor an approach that makes a necessary concession to the problematic pre-formation of the category “divinity” in the Western mind. Instead of casting my lot forever with either approach, I believe a more useful and more fluid approach can be taken by beginning to note some characteristics of the beings that have already been categorized as gods. Here I do not claim to speak for every worshipper of the gods within these three traditions.
Rather, I am concerned now with how my authors inform fellow scholars about the structure of divinity in the generalized religious systems that they describe.

The first point of the academic model of divinity that emerges from a reading of these three authors is that the gods are strongly related to perceptions of the cosmos. This is one aspect of their multiplicity, according to the authors. For Hornung, the Egyptians feel that existence is multiple, and that this multiplicity must also apply to the gods as existent beings. Nothing that has not been differentiated could exist, according to the view Hornung believes to be common to all ancient Egyptians. The divine has to be in some way differentiated, and therefore multiple. Similarly, the multiple nature of the divine in the religion of the Ancient Greeks is wrapped up in their concept of the existent cosmos. Vernant believes that the Greek view of the existent world depends on order, and their attempts to understand their universe are attempts at discovering the “order” of things, such as the ordering of powers that constitute the pantheon of the gods. According to this reasoning, the divine cannot appear to the Greeks as “ordered” if it is not multiple, and does not therefore have multiple parts to be arranged. The importance of multiplicity in the Hinduism described by Daniélou rests in part in the multiplicity of the divine’s reflection of the multiplicity of the entire cosmos, including the mundane. The tripartite structure so common among the gods is another reflection on the nature of reality, as perceived by the worshipper. Drawing on philosophical texts, Daniélou suggests that existence appears always to Vedic Hindus as series of two opposing forces and the opposition between them, and that the tripartite structure is not confined to the realm of the gods but in fact seems to be manifest in every existent thing.
The three traditions described here challenge a characteristic of divinity that the authors believe Western scholarship takes for granted, omnipotent transcendence. The gods described by Hornung appear to be the most constrained in their power. The extent of their power is geographically small in comparison to Hindu gods, who rule over entire worlds. Their limitation is fundamentally linked to their existent nature, and Hornung describes Egyptian perspectives on the gods as reasoning that that which exists must have a limit, once again relating Egyptian conceptions of divinity back to perceptions of reality. They cannot be transcendent because they are so strongly held to be a part of the existent cosmos. The entirety of the Egyptian cosmos is bordered by primeval darkness, the nonexistent Nun, and this is a limit that even the gods cannot cross. The Greek gods live on a grand scale and are not subject to the same limits of age and geography as the Egyptian gods, but they are not transcendent, endlessly powerful beings. Not only are their powers held in check by their fellow gods and by the order established by Zeus, of which they are necessarily mindful; the power of the gods of Olympus is only the latest in a succession of powers. The Greek gods have not always existed, have not always ruled over people, and they must work together to keep the powers of chaos and darkness at bay, indicating that they are not omnipotent beings.

It is more difficult to deny transcendence to the gods of Hinduism. Though some are limited in the breadth of their power because they do not exist on the same scale as the gods of the Hindu Trinity, there is a hierarchical ordering of powers in play in Hinduism, at the top of which seems to be a transcendent reality. This is similar to the ordering of powers labeled by Vernant as the pantheon. And, similarly to Vernant, Daniélou shows some interest in finding that cohesive element that allows this ordering
of the divine powers to operate as a structure. However, unlike in the ancient Greek religion, the limitation of the gods according to Daniélou is not of a spatial or temporal sort in Hinduism. Instead, the gods are limited to the manifest world, as is expressed in their multiplicity. The Hindu worshipper cannot conceive that which is truly transcendent, the Divine unity, the Immensity that seems to underlie everything existent. As existent beings and objects of worship, the gods of Hinduism have a different existential quality than the transcendent unity that underlies their existence. They rule over the existent plane in a way that suggests their transcendence of it. Some of the Hindu gods are capable of overcoming every law of the manifest world, except for the law of existence. They can never not-exist. Their share of the not-one Immensity is in their role as manifestations of some element of the inaccessible truth beyond existent reality. Though philosophically ever-present, the transcendence of the Immensity is a state as inaccessible to the gods of Daniélou’s Hinduism as is the transcendence of the chaotic unity to the gods of Egypt. The Greek gods are also subject to the limits of reality’s boundaries.

My authors use varying metaphors or expressions to describe the gods. These metaphors are useful insights into conceptualizing the gods when we consider a fresh analysis of divinity. Hornung labels the gods as signifiers, as almost formulaic figures that represent some truth about reality to Egyptian worshippers. For Daniélou, the gods are the fundamental powers of the universe, and express in themselves truths about the nature of existence itself. Vernant describes the Greek gods sometimes as individualities but more often as powers. Hornung gives us little information about the truths that are expressed by the gods of Egypt, but it is their nature as formulaic signifiers that is most
important to take away from his work. This phrase is applicable to the other two polytheistic religions, though it may not seem so at first glance. For Hornung, the gods are not restricted in their natures to the limits of the “powers” with which they are associated. For Daniélou, the gods are the powers themselves. His choice of terminology seems to indicate that the gods go beyond representing the powers; the gods in some way are those powers. Hornung is wary of the category of powers, fearing that an analysis of the gods as powers restricts them to their association with conceptual categories that, in the scholar’s attempt to make the Egyptian world comparable to our own, would inadequately describe the gods. “Terms like these,” he writes of such phrases as sun god, “describe only parts of the divine reality which we should not consider to be the sole significant ones” (Hornung, 252). Daniélou’s theory of conceptual association is useful here, for reconciling the surface difference between his model of divinity and Hornung’s. It seems, from the close reading of Daniélou above, that the author intends “powers” to mean the cohesive truths behind divine structures. The “powers” that Hornung describes are aspects of existence that seem to govern the operation of the tangible universe. A power such as an element has a visible effect on physical bodies; a power such as “justice” seems to have a visible effect on human history.

According to Daniélou’s theoretical model, if a god is symbolically associated with a “power,” this does not mean that the two should be mistakenly equated as one and the same thing. Symbols are “points where different worlds meet and where the relation between entities belonging to different orders of things may become apparent” (Daniélou, 3). Accepting Daniélou’s terminology, a scholar still may not go so far as to suggest that the equivalence between a god and a “power” is more than symbolic. Daniélou’s own
writing is difficult on this point, because he phrases the relationship between the gods and
the universal powers as nearly equivalent. However, his explanation of “the language of
symbols” in the introductory chapter of his work indicates that he more likely means that
the gods and the powers are symbolically (and not sociologically or factually) equivalent.
As I indicated above, the web of conceptual associations swirling around a god does not
operate in one direction, so that we cannot, according to this author, postulate only that
the gods are created representations of a divine truth. They are associated, as the most
basic powers of the universe, with every process and every thing in the cosmos, so that
the entire existent world can be taken as a reflection of the gods and their interactions.
And because they have their own identities, as Vernant describes them, the gods are
capable of informing social conceptions of the “powers” with which they are associated,
as easily as they are informed by these same social conceptions.

Scholarship targeted at polytheistic religions should take note of the way in
which the mystery of the gods is preserved according to the descriptions of my three
authors. Envisioning the gods as figures, with bodies, appearances, and tangible trappings
of power gives expression to the truths of the gods that devotees experience. In Egypt,
India, and Greece, the bodies and possessions of the gods serve on one hand to magnify
the semiotic power of the gods. Representations give voice to specific aspects of the
gods, thus helping to mark them as individuals. Often, the elements that make up
representations of the divine are active parts of the semiotic web that surrounds each god.
In addition to recognizing the attributes of the bodies of the gods as operational parts of a
system for expressing something of the divine nature, Hornung, Daniélou and Vernant all
point to an ability on the part of the gods to remain elusive. To paraphrase Vernant,
forasmuch as the gods are figures that express and reveal, they are also signifiers of the unrevealed, pointing to the level of remove between divine truths and human worshippers. Revelation points to the ultimately unknowable behind the revealed truth.

The power of the gods as formulaic figures lies in their conceptual association with numerous other things. From the perspective of my authors, the gods of any polytheistic system only make sense in light of the semiotic systems of which they are a part, and their meaning for worshippers can be derived from the other concepts with which they associate and the conceptual relationships that they bridge. The semiotic structures that are the gods are focal points for associations that give meaning to their associate parts through the relationship of the gods to them. In addition to concepts that we might call separate from the figures of the gods, were it not for their association, the gods themselves forms parts of the system that informs them. The “metalanguage” of the Egyptians is a coherent system with parts that function in comparison with each other. For a number of reasons, then, association might be said to be the primary means by which the gods can be experienced in the mental universes of their devotees. As scholars, it is only in context of the entire network of conceptual associations that my authors believe the gods make sense. Images and their characteristics are essentially associations, as much as the aromas and clouds that both point to and obscure divinity in Egypt are symbols that associate with the presence of the divine.

Unfortunately, for all of their concern with monotheism and the importance of multiplicity, the authors do not turn their structuralist analysis back against an obvious criticism of the relationship this model proposes between the gods and perceptions of the cosmos. If the gods of polytheism are multiple because this reflects the polytheists’
perspectives on the cosmos, it could be suggested that monotheists believe in one god because they do not view existence as a state of multiplicity. On this point, I can only defend my authors by saying that in the relationship that they describe between perceptions and pantheons, information is multidirectional. Neither the gods nor the universe are essential causes of social perception of an existent plane of multiplicities. Hornung describes the gods as formulas for expressing truths that cannot be put into other terms; he goes into little detail as to the specific truths that are thus expressed. For him, the gods reflect the nature of existence because existence is the topic of the truths that they convey. This is not a uni-directional relationship: the conception of the gods as multiple informs conceptions of existence as much as conceptions of existence as multiple inform the conception of the gods. Vernant is bold in his assertion that the gods and the structures in which they participate are reflections of social perceptions and desires; however, in his model, the multiplicity of the gods is only a secondary aspect that is a necessary byproduct of a strong sense of ordering inherent to the Greek worldview. This still leads us back to the unwritten statement about monotheism: are monotheists less concerned with ordering the powers and agencies in their conceptual universe into a coherent system?

While the authors do not grapple with these questions in explicit statements, there is a basis in their data for addressing these theoretical concerns and salvaging their works. Daniélou’s model of conceptual association is a sufficiently open system to inform our analysis of the relationship between the gods and reality. Each god is a nexus for the accumulation of symbols that are associated, that is, felt to be strongly linked, in a semiotic system. The god focuses these conceptual associations, often acting as a bridge
or a representation of the cohesive element of the web of associations or meanings at hand. This cohesive element that is the god is a strong aspect of the god’s “identity.” In this role as a nexus of associations that is strongly associated with an identity, the natures of the gods may begin now to resemble the natures described by Hornung, of formulaic figures that express truths that cannot otherwise be expressed. As confluences of associations, the figures of the gods express the cohesion of a meaning to a web of associated concepts that may be inexpressible in other terms yet is ultimately still thought to be an experienced reality. However, the gods are not unmoving structures that serve only to reconcile these associations. Once a god has an identity, it could easily be accused of having an agency. By having a name, a title, and characteristics, a god can be seen as a figure. This figure plays an informative role, as the figure of the cohesive meaning behind associations becomes itself a real concept with which yet more concepts can be associated. The web of meaning around the god is not necessarily centered on the truth behind the formula in this model: the god as a figure has ample reality to be the associative point to which perceived facets of existence seem drawn. What I have described here is a dialectic relationship where it would be inaccurate to say only that perceived reality informs the gods or vice-versa. Both inform each other.

Explained as such, the model of divinity that I put forward as valuable here betrays its debt to a structuralist approach that seeks the meaning of humanly-conceived phenomenon in the semiotic structures and webs of conceptual association surrounding that phenomenon. Vernant takes the structuralism of this analysis of the gods to the greatest height in his evident belief that, though the gods express truths that cannot otherwise be stated, we have sufficient scholarly faculties to look at the semiotic systems
of the Greeks from the outside and express the meanings of the gods, and the mythic structures with which they engage, in literally our own terms. Hornung echoes this, for he views any attempt to further an academic understanding of religion as dependent on the scholars’ ability to embed themselves in the conceptual universe of religious individuals. In order to speak of the gods of various polytheisms, to be able to compare them with each other, he admonishes us to “seek out the reality of these gods—a reality that was not invented by human beings but experienced by them” (Hornung, One and the Many, 251).

For all of my authors, this reality is not individually but rather systematically conceived, and the greatest benefit to students of religions comes from describing the system by which each religion functions when viewed with an extremely broad lens.

A valuable contribution that Vernant makes to my current inquiry is his insistence on contextualization, and he distinguishes himself as a scholar by his efforts towards this goal. For Vernant, the social and historical context of the gods bears so heavily upon their meaning that our primary concern as scholars should not be the comparison of gods from different traditions, but the thorough and particular analysis of specific traditions.

Vernant indicates that he believes the uniqueness of the Greek religion to lie in the nature of its boundary with the “social,” a boundary that he feels makes distinguishing between the “social” and “religious” spheres of human activity impossible for the modern Western scholar. This is a trait that he feels is shared by all polytheistic religions, and that requires a method that he calls “religious anthropology” which seeks to uncover simultaneously the social meanings of myths and rites, and the psychological categories, of “ancient religious man” (Vernant, Mortals and Immortals, 273). So Vernant simultaneously recognizes the value of a comparative method and its applicability to polytheist religions,
and still calls for rigorous respect for specificity. His description of the ancient Greeks therefore focuses on describing their religion in terms of all other polytheistic religions while also taking full note of the features that are most unique to the Greeks. Included in this is Vernant’s recognition of the place that Greek religion holds in the mind of his perceived Western scholar (Vernant, 274).

Finally, it is the language of language that speaks most to our scholarly concerns today. Each author describes the gods via metaphors involving language to get at the systemic nature of the meanings of the gods. For Hornung, the gods are part of a structure that operates on a similar principle as language (at least as it was understood by the author.) Each part only makes sense in light of associate and disparate parts throughout a system. Meaning is discovered by the interaction of these parts. For Daniélou as well, the pantheon is an ordered system made up of parts that gain meaning by their association. That association may even be through opposition, so that being conceptually the opposite of another symbol allows a signifier, in this case a god, to share in the symbolic strength of that symbol, thus deepening the semiotic power of the god. I am also drawn to suggest the value of conceiving of our own system, that of scholarship, as do the authors that I am describing conceive of polytheism. All three authors see the gods of their respective traditions as inextricably linked, drawing their meaning from comparison and contrast with one another and with non-divine symbols, concepts and categories. If we are to construct a system for conceptualizing divinity, for knowing what we take to be “gods” in different religious contexts, then we would only be honest to accuse ourselves of applying the same method for discovering meaning. For a scholarly model of divinity that takes in multiple types of divinity from multiple cultures should draw meaning from the
comparison of those divinities, the understanding of how our system of scholarship relates the gods and the disparate religions to each other, and the interplay between the objects of our study and the symbolic, conceptual, and categorical understandings that we bring to the gods from our own contexts. The systematization of a scholarship for investigating divinity makes the meaning of divinity apparent to the scholar, but this scholarly meaning will ultimately be so embedded in the context of the system that elaborates it, that it will not have an equal claim on meaningful truth in other semiotic systems. In the act of scholarship, we are re-contextualizing the gods in our own semiotic system, which operates like the semiotic systems of the polytheists my authors describe.

Erik Hornung writes in the conclusion of his primary work, “The more clearly we comprehend [the gods], the more clearly we see the human beings whom we wish to study” (Hornung, The One and the Many, 251). However, we should not ever fail to recognize the filters of scholarship through which the gods and the people appear to us. The model that I have described here describes divinity without defining it. There are a number of key characteristics to the model of divinity that my authors reveal. First, there is a strong dialectic relationship of divinity to perceived reality, wherein the gods and the cosmos seem to reflect each other when considered as structures. Second, the gods are parts of semiotic structures, which they sometimes seem to represent, and which are constructed of symbolic associations. Third, the gods act in the mental universes of their worshippers as formulas of meaning that are contained in figures; the relationship between the characteristics of these figures and the contours of the semiotic formulas is dialectic. Fourth, the meanings revealed by the semiotic formulas, that is, by the gods, are fluid, and the increase and expansion of the web of associations around a god increases
the breadth of power or importance of that god as a figure and as a source of meaning. Fifth, and perhaps most relevant to academic understandings of divinity, the mystery of the divine is always preserved, and that which is revealed always points back to a greater unrevealed truth.

This is why Hornung writes of the gods, “We sense that they say something valid about the world and about mankind. But no language has been found whose expressive richness can compare with that of the gods themselves” (Hornung, 259). Even our own act of scholarship, which seems at first to reveal the nature of the gods, must recognize how readily it obscures their reality. The model of divinity that I have described above is one approach, one that is useful for refining our own scholarly categories and pushing us to consider how we define the divine as a subject of inquiry. With these five points so clearly elaborated by my three authors, we can move forward to investigate how other gods fit into this category of divinity, and this may broaden our academic understandings of the gods. Yet the figures of the gods themselves will ultimately remain indefinable for us. Forasmuch as the reality of the divine is inaccessible to the people whose mental categories the authors claim to recreate, it is inaccessible to the scholar as well. We are still left feeling that only the gods know the answer to the question first posed in this paper, “what is a god?” As Vernant’s most methodological essay reminds us, in any inquiry into the religious universe of the other, “…in the end, we are asking questions, like anthropologists, about ourselves” (Vernant, Mortal and Immortals, 289). These authors have provided a means to begin asking and answering such questions.
Works Cited


