




BOOK REVIEW

## Travis Dumsday, *Alternative Conceptions of the Spiritual: Polytheism, Animism, and More in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*

(London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024). Pp 240. £59.50.  
ISBN 9781350382657

Hans Van Eyghen 

Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands  
Email: [hansvaneyghen@gmail.com](mailto:hansvaneyghen@gmail.com)

Travis Dumsday (though self-identifying as Christian (p. 3)) starts off his introduction by complaining that Christian monotheism and metaphysical naturalism are the only games in town in contemporary philosophy of religion. The main goal of his book is to showcase alternatives. The alternatives under discussion are polytheism, animism, panspiritism, and theophanism. For all four, Dumsday gives a detailed statement of their core claims and discusses arguments in favour of them. Below I summarize and critically discuss Dumsday's book.

The book's four main chapters have a similar structure. Dumsday starts off by clearly defining each alternative. For polytheism and animism, he draws on existing philosophical arguments or insider literature. The insider literature he uses are mostly western defences or forms of neopaganism. For panspiritism and theophanism, Dumsday draws on works by one single defender. Dumsday's analysis is very thorough yet accessible. Dumsday goes to great efforts to distinguish various sub-forms and demarcate the alternatives from one another (especially for polytheism and animism). Some of the alternatives are theistic (polytheism and some forms of animism) while others are explicitly not (especially theophanism). After stating the core ideas, Dumsday discusses a number of arguments in favour of each position.

The attention to arguments shows that Dumsday is not merely interested in laying out the details of all four alternatives. He aims to say that all four are not just strange anomalies or products of by-gone eras but are intricate and even rational positions to hold. The arguments he surveys are mostly drawn from academic philosophers and neopagan authors. Dumsday does not present many arguments he invented himself.

Dumsday's statement on how polytheism is to be understood is the most elaborate. A first, common distinction among polytheists he notes is between hard and soft polytheism. Adherents of hard polytheism believe that many Gods exist in a literally real way with powers and personalities of their own. Adherents of soft polytheism deny this. Gods are rather metaphors or archetypes and do not have real, separated personhood or agency. The chapter also discusses how Gods can be demarcated from other supernatural beings like spirits or angels. The discussion connects to a second distinction between monocentric polytheism

(where belief in multiple deities is paired with belief in one ultimate God) and polycentric polytheism (where multiple Gods exist that are not dependent on any ultimate God).

Dumsday's discussion of arguments in favour of polytheism is also more elaborate than for the other three alternatives. One class of arguments are the extensions of arguments for theism. For example, some note that cosmological arguments do not conclude with the existence of one God alone. The existence of contingent facts can also be explained by the activity of multiple Gods. Here Dumsday notes that a number of monotheists have extended the cosmological (and other) arguments to argue for monotheism over polytheism. Dumsday notes a better case in some versions of the moral argument. Defenders of the moral argument argue that the existence of God best accounts for objective morality. Some note that polytheism can better account for the existence of multiple sets of (sometimes conflicting) moral norms. These sets can be traced back to different Gods. A different argument extends the Thomist claim that there must be a being whose essence is existence. Proponents of polytheism argue that the conclusion to one supreme, necessarily existing being is compatible with the existence of many lesser, non-necessarily existing beings. Dumsday points out how opponents could undermine the argument by noting how it has been criticized in a number of ways. He could have added that while such arguments show that a polytheist conclusion is warranted, they do not show that polytheism is more probable than monotheism.

Other arguments for polytheism presented are a link between animism and polytheism and an argument from experiences. If animism is plausible and all that exists has a basic form of intelligence and power, it is likely that multiple advanced forms of intelligence and power, like Gods, will emerge. Dumsday also lists reports of experiences of multiple Gods. Most of them are drawn from neopagan literature. Finally, Dumsday notes that polytheism appears to escape the problem of evil and of divine hiddenness. The existence of multiple non-perfect Gods is perfectly compatible with the existence of wide-scale evil and of non-believers. Unlike the other arguments, the last can help build a case for polytheism over and against monotheism. These arguments are also more straightforward and not couched in neoplatonic or Thomist concepts like the first set of arguments.

The chapter on animism (the idea that everything is alive and spirited) notes a distinction between hard and soft animism. Adherents of hard animism believe that nature really is spirited similar to humans while soft animism takes a less firm stance. Dumsday discusses three arguments for animism. The first sees a close connection between panpsychism (the claim that everything is in some way conscious) and animism. While both positions can come apart, it is far more likely that everything is alive and spirited if everything is in some way conscious. The second argument sees support for animism in the fact that belief in nature spirits is widespread. Here Dumsday spends considerable time on objections. A third argument points to experiences of nature being alive or agential. Here Dumsday provides a large number of reports of such experiences and again discusses counter-arguments.

Large parts of the chapters on panspiritism and theophanisms consist of exegesis of the works by its main defenders (respectively Steve Taylor for panspiritism and Eric Perl for theophanisms). Put shortly, panspiritism is the view that everything partakes in an all-pervading universal consciousness. Theophanisms is the view that all that exists is a manifestation of divinity. The divine that manifests in all of reality stands beyond being or all categories and therefore cannot properly be called 'God'. Both positions are fairly new although theophanisms claims to stand in a longer tradition stretching back to Neoplatonism. Dumsday focuses on contemporary accounts and how they differ from similar accounts of reality, like panpsychism. The statements of panspiritism and theophanisms are more technical than those of polytheism and animism. The former are also less connected to practised religions or spiritualities. This renders the discussion on panspiritism and theophanisms more like an alternative account of metaphysics. Dumsday does note that some reported experiences chime well with both accounts.

The discussion of arguments in favour of panspiritism and theophanism is much shorter than that of the other alternatives. Dumsday notes that panspiritism can again be supported by some experiences. For example, some report experiencing an all-pervasive light or energy. A next argument is that panspiritism is a better alternative than rivaling accounts in philosophy of mind. Panspiritism has no problems accounting for consciousness like physicalism does. It also has no problem accounting for mind-body interaction which haunts dualist accounts.

Dumsday does not present arguments in favour of theophanism. He merely notes that some of the intuitions in support of theophanism can be doubted. For example, defenders see a close connection between being and intelligibility (or understandability). The connection supports the main claim that all is grounded in an ultimate divine intelligence. This connection is not obvious.

For all four alternatives, Dumsday presents a stellar overview of the philosophical discussion. His overview shows that all four are viable alternatives and merit more philosophical attention. Dumsday is more interested in presenting an overview than presenting his own arguments. He sometimes gives cursory evaluative remarks on some of the arguments but rarely takes a strong position.

One limitation is that the arguments surveyed mainly aim to show the viability or internal consistency of the alternatives. Sometimes the alternative's viability is compared to opposing views (especially for panspiritism). Mostly no comparison is made to the two main games in town, that is to say, Christian monotheism and metaphysical naturalism. The chapter on polytheism does suggest that polytheism may compare favourably to monotheism in the light of evil and fact of non-belief. That discussion, however, remains rather short. Dumsday does discuss how monotheists may have extensions to theistic arguments on offer that favour monotheism, but this discussion is also not developed in depth.

Another lack is the limited interaction with lived religious traditions. Overall, the book remains a very Western book. This is acknowledged by Dumsday in the chapter on polytheism. While acceptable, the discussion in most chapters could have been enriched by interacting with polytheistic traditions like African-Diaspora traditions, Hinduism, or Chinese indigenous religions. The lack is clearest in the chapter on animism. Most of the discussion is on recent academic defences of animism. The survey of experiences also focuses almost exclusively on Western experiences of nature being alive. Some discussion of indigenous animistic traditions like Siberian shamanism would have been in order and could have helped further Dumsday's case. Some Eastern traditions also bear similarities to theophanism. Here Vedantism and Daoism come to mind.

Like much of contemporary philosophy of religion, some of the accounts remain rather far removed from living religious practices. While not uncommon, it raises the question whether the four alternatives are just alternatives for professional philosophers or also for religious practitioners.

Dumsday's book will serve as a great introduction to the four alternatives. It will provide readers with a strong sense of how the alternatives should be understood and it surveys arguments in favour of each. Dumsday does not take a stance on what alternative is the most rational option. His main goal seems to be showing that philosophy of religion stands in need of diversification by taking more positions seriously.

The book raises a lot more questions. Some of the questions are: How do the alternatives connect to non-Western traditions? How do the alternatives fare in comparison to monotheism or metaphysical naturalism? One may hope that these and related questions are addressed in future scholarship.

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**Cite this article:** Van Eyghen H (2024) Alternative Conceptions of the Spiritual: Polytheism, Animism, and More in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion. *Religious Studies*, 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000775>