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Animism and Philosophy of Religion

Tiddy Smith

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Palgrave Frontiers in Philosophy of Religion

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Introduction

Tiddy Smith

Nobody cares about animism; well, nobody in philosophy departments at least. Search through the archives of a few of the leading philosophy journals and you will be hard-pressed to find the topic as much as mentioned. Incredibly, this lack of interest persists even within the very subdiscipline that should be most interested: Philosophy of religion. It is an almost paradoxical state of affairs. Most contemporary philosophers of religion find they spend their days debating the existence of a divine being—a god. And let's face it, this ain't just any old god, but usually (even if tacitly) the god of Abraham. It may seem unlikely, but the sad truth is that religion in its various forms and with its various commitments is not really the study of philosophy of religion at all. What should be a mighty river of critical thought is, on the contrary, a little creek. Where we ought to find depth and breadth and various rapid tributaries, we find instead shallowness, narrowness, and a gentle trickle of progress in one direction.

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Sure, a growing number of subclusters have recently emerged inside of which philosophers engage with some "unusual" theologies and cosmologies. Most prominently are the Buddhist and Vedic traditions, containing as they do their own rich histories of critical discourse. Yet this development has not much changed the overarching direction of the field. Lecturers continue to dish out the standard menu. A wide-eyed freshman taking an introductory philosophy of religion paper will be introduced to something like the following: Aquinas and his five ways, Kierkegaard and his radical faith, William James' will to believe, Plantinga's proper functions, and perhaps a bit of Swinburne, Mackie, or Flew for garnish. If lucky, the student may even get to ponder whether God could make really enormous stones, bigger than even He could carry! The freshman will find a god hiding in every nook and cranny. God is often said to be omnipresent—in every flower and around every star—but should he be *in every final exam question*?

Perhaps there is ultimately nothing awry here. Perhaps all religion deals, in some sense or other, with a god. Of course, not necessarily the god of Abraham, but some divine power, some hidden hand, some agent cause of the Universe, some sort of Ultimate Reality (with capital letters, which makes it quite important). The hallmark of any religion is its quest to relate humanity with some sort of transcendent absolute. In English, we name this thing "God", but elsewhere it has names such as "Allah" or "Brahman" or "Mulajadi Nabolon" or "Bondye". Behind the veil of our culturally determined names and conceptions, there lies a common source for the religious urge.

This is the tack taken by many modern theologian-philosophers. Take Robert Cummings Neville, according to whom all religious phenomena can be reduced to "human engagement of ultimacy expressed in cognitive articulations, existential responses to ultimacy that give ultimate definition to the individual, and patterns of life and ritual in the face of ultimacy" (2018: 13). All religions grasp at *ultimacy*, however they conceive of it and whatever they happen to name it. In a similar vein, for the pluralist philosopher John Hick, the focus of all religious traditions is *The Real* and all religious activity is an attempt at turning toward *The Real*. The distinct religious traditions ultimately share the same subject, some

sort of transcendental absolute. To quote Hick, when he quoted Rumi: The lamps are different, but the light is the same (1989: 233).

Indeed, some philosophy of religion textbooks that seek to broaden the horizons of the discipline incorporates these sorts of pluralist and transcendentalist commitments. Keith Yandell's *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction* is a good example of this. It is, in many ways, a superb example of inclusiveness, as it fluently navigates discussions of Buddhist and Vedic doctrines in among the more familiar discussions of the Abrahamic variety. And Yandell's discussion seems to succeed just because it is cloaked in the language of a transcendentalist pluralism. Buddhists and Jains, for example, seek not "The Real", nor "Ultimacy", but "Ultimate Reality" (1999: 109). Using such terms as these, we can make sense of religion as a shared human quest for a common purpose.

So, we may not need to worry after all. God figures prominently in the academic philosophy of religion *just because* religious activity is essentially concerned with placing believers in relationship with "God", not the big beardy giant who lives in the clouds, but the metaphysically fundamental, that is, the Absolute or the Ultimate or the Real, or some other sort of very capitalized being. At the end of the day, these are all just tags that help to make our transcendental quest comprehendible. The tags are different, but the referent is the same. Like the lamps, the light is no different. And religion—all religion—is the *reaching for* or *the communing with* or *the submitting to* or the *turning toward* this same light. Philosophers of religion talk about God because that is what religion talks about. It's a nice and tidy story that absolves the discipline of its parochialism. Alas, if only it were true.

The problem that arises from this conception of the discipline is a common problem for any attempt to define religion. That is, if we dish out the core idea of religion solely in transcendentalist terms then too many religious traditions would no longer count as religious at all. The above definitions of religion that incorporate metaphysical absolutes like *The Real* or *Ultimacy* or *Fundamental Being* systematically exclude all those religious traditions whose focus is not a transcendental reality. Opposed to all the *transcendentalist* traditions, there are *immanentist* traditions whose focus is the maintenance of right relations in this world—now—with the living, the dead, the hunted, and the hidden. We can

readily identify such traditions as *religious*, even without a thoroughgoing theory or definition of religion. When offerings are left for the ancestors or when a shrine is established for the spirit of the forest, these are religious acts—like it or not. And so any definition that would exclude these examples is inherently suspicious. Indeed, the problem of defining religion is so thoroughly vexed that our non-reflective judgments about its scope are perhaps, at present, our most reliable guide.

Transcendentalism is not the only pervasive bias in the field of philosophy of religion. There is also a bias for *orthodoxy* over *orthopraxy*. That is to say, right belief—as opposed to right practice—is emphasized. And so, religions which stress the importance of the latter at the expense of the former are often overlooked. Perhaps this bias is, again, unsurprising. It is, after all, the duty of philosophy to draw out and analyze the contents of our beliefs. Thus, it is more convenient to engage with religions which are more explicit about matters of dogma and theology. But whatever the *cause* of this bias, it nevertheless affects *which traditions* are studied, and *which parts* of those traditions are taken seriously.

And then—the cherry on top—there is analytic philosophy's cozy relationship with modern science. Despite some infrequent creationist murmurings from evangelicals such as Alvin Plantinga, the field of philosophy of religion is like any other within the broader context of analytic philosophy. Contemporary philosophy of religion is pretty science-friendly. It operates largely under the assumption that the general picture provided by the sciences (particularly biology, geology, and other "historical sciences") is basically correct. And so, it is thought, if any religious ideas deserve unique attention, these must be those ideas which do not impinge on the picture provided to us by the sciences. This desire to cohere with the general picture of modern science manifests as a general avoidance of the kooky or spooky. Religions embracing something like the *Philosopher's God* are given priority: God as first cause, God as ground of all being, God as necessary being. But those traditions with commitments which appear to violate the picture of our current best science are kept at arm's length. Angels and demons, for example, hardly get a mention. So what for traditions with star ancestors or person-rivers? At best, they are seen as implausible. At worst, they are seen as derisible.

What remains is an austere philosophy of religion. What remains is a field that has set aside a large portion of human religious activity before having even *touched* upon it. What remains is a field in need of a broader range of discussions and directions. This volume is an attempt to carve out one such path.

1 Animism's Neglect

Because of the biases alluded to above, analytic philosophy of religion singles out animist traditions as almost uniquely unworthy of study. At almost every step, it seems, the animist manages to put a foot wrong. Animist religions often lack *transcendental* commitments. Animists often emphasize *ritual* and *practice* over right belief. And the denizens of the animist's worldview—whether taken to be ghosts or spirits or sprites or ancestors or living rocks—all seem to violate the naturalism of the sciences. Animists are seen as embracing primitive superstition and magical thinking. In embracing these *very bad things*, the animist's crude picture of the world constitutes a denial of both modern science and the nuances of sophisticated theology. Animism, then, has no place in modern philosophy of religion. Like a UFO religion or a cargo cult, animism has been leapfrogged by more "sophisticated" studies of theism, faith, and salvation.

How should an animist feel about this situation? Are the animists upset by this? Who knows? And indeed, who cares? We may as well admit that the number of believers in animistic traditions has been decimated within the last 500 years or so, ever since the dawn of the age of discovery. Whether by war, plague, colonization, conversion, or genocide, the numbers of adherents of the animist religions have dwindled. The variety of animist traditions which once flourished are no more. So, as a matter of brute mathematics, there are few to no animists working in analytic philosophy departments. Few researchers are sympathetic to the view that, say, a certain mountain might be an *ancesto*r or that said mountain might feel such emotions as rage, sadness, or jealousy. Of course, there are a few outliers here and there: Neopagan and New Age types ("hippies" for short), who tend to get associated with crystal healing, crystal skulls, and

tie-dyed, organic, patchouli-infused sweat lodges. Since these hippy outliers are taken to be mostly harmless, they are usually tolerated as human curios. But by and large, the numbers are such in the academy (see De Cruz and De Smedt, this volume) that it is unsurprising that there are few animist voices in philosophy. Even less surprising is the lack of any sustained critical engagement with any animist traditions. After all, such traditions are widely considered to be, not just kooky or spooky, but quite evidently *wrong*.

But has it *always* been like this, and *everywhere*?

If we search for historical precedents of philosophical engagement with animism, there are a few examples that can be found. However, their locus is largely not within the standard corpus of the analytic tradition. The critical theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, for example, argued in their 1947 *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Dialectic of Enlightenment) that positivist commitments of the enlightenment worldview are the cause of ecological alienation and disenchantment. It is precisely because of the enlightenment's "extirpation of animism" that we have arrived at a reality divorced from soulish qualities (2002: 2). Our experience of the world is delimited by the denial of the subject, of subjects more generally, and by the rise of the cold, imposing, and impassive object-world. From this disenchanted state of being, a form of domination is born in which nature is regarded as a bare machine turning human cogs. As Lambert Zuidervaart characterizes this domination, it has a triple sense: The domination of nature by human beings, the domination of nature within human beings, and, in both of these forms of domination, the domination of some human beings by others (2015: §2).

More recently, there is the work of Bruno Latour, another philosopher "from the continent", whose discussions of animism have gone relatively unnoticed in Anglophone philosophy departments. His challenging book, *We Have Never Been Modern*, is a hermeneutics of modern science, which traces what he dubs the "constitution" of modern science to early modern thinkers like Hobbes and Boyle. For Latour, unlike Horkheimer and Adorno, our modern, positivist, scientistic interpretation of the world has been a (failed) attempt to set out a nature as divorced from agency and the subject. But as Latour sees it, even this naturalist ontology

derives from (and persists in) an understanding of agency that could only be described as "animistic". In an interview on this subject, he says:

> If animism is about things having agency, then one thing modernists have done has been to multiply the amount of agencies in the world to an extraordinary degree. But we have silenced it. … [T]he angels that are behind gravitational waves or gravitational forces have no wings. The wings are not visible. It's a very beautiful case. If you ask what it is to be modern, is it to have angels carrying gravity? Is it angels losing their wings so we now believe that gravity is a purely material force? And what would it mean if it were only a material force? It would be a really strange thing, indeed. What is it to have agency? Now take the scientists who believe that things have agency—and who doesn't say that? … [T]he great puzzle is how they can believe that animism is a problem, as if they were living in a world where no one has it, no one speaks, no one has a soul, and suddenly there are these strange guys from far away … who believe that things have agency. (2010: 88)

For Latour, we have never been modern and our naturalism is a cloak beneath which hides all the spirits that animists had ever conjectured.

We need not remain on the continent. William James, the American pragmatist, explicitly discussed the phenomenological richness of animistic views and took the animist's way of being as definitive of the human religious impulse at its most naked. In his seminal work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he writes:

> Weight, movement, velocity, direction, position, what thin, pallid, uninteresting ideas! How could the richer animistic aspects of Nature, the peculiarities and oddities that make phenomena picturesquely striking or expressive, fail to have been first singled out and followed by philosophy as the more promising avenue to the knowledge of Nature's life? Well, it is still in these richer animistic and dramatic aspects that religion delights to dwell. It is the terror and beauty of phenomena, the "promise" of the dawn and of the rainbow, the "voice" of the thunder, the "gentleness" of the summer rain … and not the physical laws which these things follow, by which the religious mind still continues to be most impressed. (1917: 489)

James had already written something similar, albeit in condensed form and more like a slogan. In *The Will to Believe* he noted that for all religious people, "the universe is no longer a mere It to us, but a Thou".

Even less well-known and further removed from the analytic tradition, Fukansai Habian, a Japanese Jesuit philosopher, wrote the *Myōtei Dialogues* in 1605. This text sought to resolve the religious conflict of his time: One between East and West, having Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shinto on the one hand and the newcomer Christianity on the other. In this very interesting discussion (which has unfortunately received little philosophical attention outside Japan), Habian treats Shinto as an animist tradition, and he discusses some of the problems that are peculiar to its animistic ontology. He asks questions that hadn't been asked before. How, for example, could the Sun *kami* be thought to be the "ancestor" of the Japanese race? This clearly could not be true, reasons Habian, since every human has a human mother. It follows, he reasons, that the commitment to an animate sun ancestor must be thrown out. Suns do not beget humans.

Habian also stresses some explanatory advantages of theistic Christianity over the animistic metaphysics of Shinto. Whereas Shinto texts proffered explanations for the origins of *particular* places or *particular* kinds of beings—the Japanese islands, for example—the religion had no compelling *ultimate* explanation for the causes or origin of *all things* (Paramore, 2008: 238). It is a truly fascinating discourse of a kind not found in the West. It is a snapshot in time, standing witness to ancient beliefs facing the threat of a nascent European colonialism. While the newcoming Christianity would largely be rebuffed in Japan, it would elsewhere succeed in extirpating the old beliefs.

So, discussions can be found, but few fit naturally within the traditional canon of analytic philosophy of religion. Where the analytic corpus is concerned, the most obvious candidate discussion is found in Hume's *Natural History of Religion*. At the evolutionary root of all religion, Hume conjectured, was an animistic impulse which would first of all manifest as a crude polytheism. The birth of animism is humanity's first attempt to escape ignorance of natural causes. In a passage which is by now legendary, he writes:

> There is an universal tendency amongst mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object those qualities with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious. We find human faces in the moon, armies in the clouds; and by a natural propensity, if not corrected by experience and reflection, ascribe malice and good will to everything that hurts or pleases us. Hence the frequency and beauty of the *prosopopœia* in poetry, where trees, mountains, and streams are personified, and the inanimate parts of nature acquire sentiment and passion.… No wonder, then, that mankind, being placed in such an absolute ignorance of causes, and being at the same time so anxious concerning their future fortunes, should immediately acknowledge a dependence on invisible powers possessed of sentiment and intelligence.… Nor is it long before we ascribe to them thought, and reason, and passion, and sometimes even the limbs and figures of men, in order to bring them nearer to a resemblance with ourselves. (1956: 29–30)

In blunt opposition to the celebratory tones of Horkheimer, Adorno, and James, Hume here offers a debunking argument against animism and its naive commitments. Hume, alongside Habian, sees the animist as making a kind of mistake. Already, some lines can be drawn between the pugilists of this debate.

In contemporary philosophy of religion, the view of Hume and Habian persists: Animism is a naive and superstitious mistake in reasoning. This idea has survived more or less until the present day. Funnily, this consensus has been the result of two attacks from quite different directions. On the one hand, animism has been seen as impeding believers' paths to salvation (this is, as it happens, Habian's view). On this view, sophisticated theism has been taken to be the cure for this childish way of thinking. Then there is Hume's naturalistic attack, which would be later developed by thinkers on the outskirts of modern philosophy, like Sigmund Freud and James Frazer. [1] Ever since the development of experimental science, animism has been seen as redundant and explanatorily dangerous: A presumptuous reading of intention and will into blind

[1] Frazer once remarked incredulously that "[i]f trees are animate … the cutting of them down becomes a delicate surgical operation, which must be performed with as tender a regard as possible for the feelings of the sufferers" (1983: 148).

nature. As T. H. Huxley put the point: "The essence of modern as contrasted with ancient, physiological science appears to me to lie in its antagonism to animistic hypotheses and animistic phraseology" (1881: 800). For the theists, animism is not efficacious for salvation. For the naturalists, animism is of no use in a proper understanding of the world. This twin-pronged attack has left animism with little ground to hold, rejected by the supernaturalists and naturalists alike.

So, we can regroup. Unpopular, unworthy of study, and unlikely to be on the right track: That's the received view. And it's precisely the view that this volume seeks to challenge. Make no mistake, the aim of this volume is not to convert the reader to animism. This is no flimsy plea for new congregants. Indeed, the contributors to this volume disagree strongly with each other about whether animism has anything to recommend it. They even disagree about just what this thing, animism, is. To that extent, they may often be talking past each other. But that is part and parcel of the process of reappraisal. As can be seen within the first few chapters, anthropologists over the last century have themselves been debating just what animism is. There remains little by way of consensus. And it may take decades of arguing past one another before the strategic positions in a worthwhile debate can be triangulated.

The aim of this volume is not to convince, but to challenge. It is hoped that the floor will be opened to a debate that was never really begun, let alone settled. Indeed, as the reader may notice, the chapters that follow may, altogether, be difficult to shoehorn into the category of philosophy *of religion*. Whether we should be animists about robots (Nyholm, Chap. 13, this volume) or whether we are animists when we speak of newborns as persons (Wilkinson, Chap. 2, this volume): These are not questions that a traditional philosophy of religion would consider part of its domain. Whether such discussions *should* be included within that domain is a question I will leave with the reader.

2 Animism and Its Definitions

The reader is predictably annoyed. No definition of animism has yet been given. I have gestured toward vague ideas like ancestor mountains, living rocks, and the subjectivity of the universe, but I have not really given any definition of animism. What's the topic of this book? What sort of book *is this*? Define your terms!

Alright, I relent. Animism was first set out as a category in the study of religion by E. B. Tylor, who defined it as the belief in a range of spirit beings, who could occupy such bodies as "trees and rocks and waterfalls" (1871: 260). These spirit beings are like us, in some important senses (they share with us the capacity for sensation and the having of some kind of cultural life). So, on a first pass, we could define animism in a very traditional way like so:

> Animism is the belief that human beings have souls, or, by extension, the belief that animals, plants or even rocks have souls.… [T]hey are subjects of feeling or consciousness, or display intelligence, in ways that ensouled human beings do. (Eldridge, 1996: 3)

It is a definition that is faithful to Tylor's theory. But this is only a first approach—it is *one way* to start thinking about animism. And as Frederico Rosa will demonstrate in his chapter (Chap. 4), animism was not taken by Tylor to be a metaphysical view *restricted* only to spirits who might reside in strange places like trees and rocks and waterfalls. Instead, Tylor held that animism, qua belief in spiritual beings, permeated all human religious thought to some degree or other throughout history. What Tylor wished to emphasize was the belief in spirits of any form, gods included. Tylor, like Latour, would have lamented that we have never been modern.

With the development of anthropology in the twentieth century, Tylor's terminology came to be seen as something of an embarrassment. His theory was seen to perpetuate perspectives of indigenous peoples as primitive and childlike in their metaphysics; as though hunter-gatherers could not reliably discern between living and non-living things or between the ensouled and the spiritually inert. But are animists really making such an obvious mistake? It would be an uncharitable

interpretation of animist ritual and practice, akin to taking the economist's talk of "invisible hands" to signify a belief in disembodied, causally efficacious limb-beings.

There is the possibility that what is being said by the animist is a kind of metaphor. Talk of sentient trees, who might become sad or angry, needs to be understood as a way of describing the state of trees in language that we would usually call "poetic" or "romantic". A forest which is "angry" when it is clearfelled is just a forest in a disrupted or undesirable state. A river which will "avenge" its own pollution is just a river that will eventually be unswimmable. But this approach—the interpretation of animistic descriptions as metaphorical—seems to destroy any notion that animistic descriptions are propositionally distinct from naturalistic descriptions. It seems that either we must understand the animist literally, and take talk of "angry rivers" on its childlike face. Or we must take the animist to be speaking metaphorically, and take talk of "angry rivers" as a sort of whimsical description of what is otherwise obvious. Neither approach seems to do the job. As Mario von der Ruhr writes, this literal/metaphorical distinction cuts too severely on both sides, such that animist "beliefs and rituals become either ridiculous or cheap, saying either too much to be intelligible, or too little to convey the meaning intended" (1996: 30).

In the history of the social sciences, the meaning of the term "animism" gradually shifted toward more charitable interpretations, which sought to sail between the Scylla of literalism and the Charybdis of metaphor. Most notably, the later anthropologist Irving Hallowell (particularly in his *Ojibwe Ontology, Behaviour, and Worldview* [1960]) emphasized the animist's commitment to what he dubbed other-than-human-persons. This new interpretation stood in opposition to Tylor's notion of a commitment to spiritual beings or a belief in the "animation of all nature". What the animists were doing hinged on unfamiliar attributions of *personhood*, not life or spirit.

It is Hallowell's view which has informed a new outlook on animism within anthropology, and this new outlook tends to commend animist belief and ritual. Far from making a mistake, animists are doing something radical. Animists are not misascribing life to the non-living. They are accepting *as persons* a whole bunch of things that the anthropologist

typically doesn't. Anthropologists following in the footsteps of Hallowell have similarly sought to find ways to capture what is special about animists' interpretations of the world without ascribing to them metaphysical views that border on the magical. It is this *new animism*, as it has come to be called, that has had a wide influence across the fields of anthropology and religious studies. Notable contemporary proponents of the new animism include Graham Harvey, Tim Ingold, Nurit Bird-David, and Philippe Descola. The new animists give what Mikel Burley dubs an affirmatory approach to animism (Chap. 6, this volume). The new animist approach celebrates the worldview and practice of the animists. This approach suggests a radical and alternative way of interacting with the world around us.

So what for Tylor and his positivism? The Tylorian view was not lost to the abyss of discarded scientific theories. In fact, it largely persists intact, but not within the field of anthropology. It continues to shape and direct schools of research in the burgeoning new field of cognitive science of religion (CSR). The most notable "neo-Tylorian" cognitive scientist of religion is Stewart Guthrie, whose 1993 book *Faces in the Clouds* is a classic in the field. According to Guthrie and other CSR researchers, the likes of Hume, Tylor, Freud, and Frazer were essentially on the right track. Animism is a sort of error in reasoning. The error is the belief that some sorts of non-living, non-sentient, non-communicative, non-persons are living, sentient, and communicative persons. The aim of CSR is to explain *why* this error keeps on getting made. There is, in that respect, a major divide in the literature between contemporary anthropology and contemporary CSR.

The positivist commitments of CSR have been challenged on the grounds that the field is not reflective enough of its own heritage and that it fails to articulate why we should take such a dim view of animist thought on any grounds distinct from our own modernist, scientistic frame. In this volume, we will witness such a challenge take place. In the very next chapter, Darryl Wilkinson will mount an attack on Guthrie that leads to some very interesting conceptual questions indeed. Guthrie's own response to Wilkinson may be found in the following chapter. Is this debate between CSR and contemporary anthropology resolvable? To any outsider, it would seem not. These two scientific paradigms appear to

take up incommensurable understandings of animism. They are talking past each other.

This difference in understanding leads to a clear delineation between those who would embrace and those who would scorn animism. But as Mikel Burley shows in his chapter in this volume, there may be a way to resolve this dichotomy. A third position is available which can be found expressed in some of the recent work of the anthropologists Rane Willerslev and Nicholas Peterson. This position Burley dubs a "critical approach" to animism, which may (or may not) be better placed to give the sort of self-reflective "cultural critique" which we expect from our anthropological investigations of other cultures, especially when those cultures appear to harbor ontological commitments which strongly differ from our own.

So, we have at least one distinction to draw between those who would take animism to consist in a set of commitments to the existence of non-human persons and those who would take animism to consist in the attribution of a soul or spirit to things that most of us to have no soul or spirit (e.g. trees and rocks and rivers). But there is a stronger view according to which animism is a position about biology, concerning what sorts of things are *animate* or *living*. It is this definition that will be discussed by Graham Oppy and Eric Steinhart (Chaps. 9 and 10, respectively), who disagree about the proper scope of attributions of life and agency. For Oppy, attributions of life are to be conservative, applying only to the usual suspects (humans, trees, bedbugs, etc.). For Steinhart, they are to be liberal, applying to a wider range of things than we have previously taken (solar systems, for example).

So, is animism a thesis about life, about spirits, or about personhood? In this volume, that question will not be answered. Instead, each discussion must be taken on its own terms. Perhaps there is a view that is most plausible. On the other hand, perhaps all three can be proper interpretations of particular animist religious traditions, which will naturally differ across time and place. But perhaps the crucial thread that ties each of the three views together is the following (very crude) notion: Animists, across all times and places, are sympathetic to the view that many non-humans are human-like, in some way which seriously challenges traditional Western views of life, spirit, and personhood.

3 Animism, Science, and Reason

How reasonable is animism? Hopefully reasonable enough. After all, evidence from developmental psychology indicates that we are, as a species, predisposed to attribute life, consciousness, agency, and human-like personality to non-humans from a very early age. It was this feature of our cognition that CSR was so eager to explain. As I will discuss in my own chapter on childhood animism, there may be good reason to think that this predisposition is a reliable feature of human cognition, rather than some kind of pediatric epistemic disease that is cured by the wisdom of adulthood. The extent to which children animate the world around them should, I argue, not be so glibly assumed to be a mistake.

However, as already noted, Oppy disagrees (Chap. 9). He argues that to attribute life and sentience so promiscuously is to go against our best science. It would be irrational to continue to animate the world while also understanding what the science has said. For sentience in particular, biologists agree, is a relatively recent phenomenon in evolutionary history restricted to sufficiently complex organisms. Animism, understood as the promiscuous attribution of life to the non-living, is not reasonable. This is, of course, the common sense view. But could one reasonably accept both the scientific world picture and some kind of animism? Steinhart answers affirmatively. Whereas Oppy's argument depends, in part, on the ultimate correctness of the naturalistic, scientific picture, Steinhart turns this picture on its head. It is through his developing a thoroughly naturalistic theory of animation that he endorses a picture of the universe as full to the brim with living agents. There are many more things with a far greater degree of animation in this universe than the received common sense view tells us. In Steinhart's words: "Far from declaring that animism is superstitious or unscientific, modern Western science affirms that animism is a scientifically accurate and sophisticated way of understanding nature".

Steinhart and Oppy are both naturalists, and they disagree about the degree to which the universe is animate or *living*. For Oppy, the animists are fools. For Steinhart, they are prophets. But could animists be reasonable just because their commitments and practices are not so

ontologically imposing? Evan Fales believes this is the case. He presents us with a picture of "sensible animism" in Chap. 8, which rejects the definition of animism adopted by both Steinhart and Oppy. For the sensible animist, attributions of life or spirit take second place to the attribution of what Fales dubs "personages". To treat any particular thing as a personage is to class it as part of the social structure. It is to acknowledge its *office*. As Fales will explain:

> [W]e have natural persons who are designated official roles, and those officers occupy the offices out of which the structure is fashioned. Here, again, a physical thing–a natural person–embodies an immaterial personage: an officer. The natural person is mortal; the officer survives as long as the correlate office/social role does–that is to say, the officer is, at least potentially, not mortal, or anyway not subject to natural death. Indeed, the personage–the officer–can be transferred intact from one person to another, and so passed down through the generations.

This social-structural view shares common ground with the new animists such as, most notably, the early Hallowell.

Yet another alternative is proposed by Greg Dawes in his chapter on animism and its relationship with naturalism. Here, Dawes advocates a "cognitive pluralism" which conceives of animism as a practice which is (at least sometimes) successful in certain contexts. Conceiving of animism as a practice, Dawes turns away from animism as an ontology and embraces what could be called an enactivist account. By so doing, he believes that the apparent conflict between animism and naturalism can be resolved, and that this is not by virtue of embracing a broader sort of pragmatist view of knowledge (one which denies that truth is a necessary condition for knowing). It may be that interpretations of animic practice and scientific practice converge on key questions, and even that certain animic practices *outcompete* scientific rivals.

The starkly different conclusions drawn by myself, Oppy, Steinhart, Fales, and Dawes show that the relationships between animism, science, naturalism, and epistemology are complex, contestable, and contested. Indeed, it is perhaps unsurprising to note that the anthropologist Robin Horton figures prominently throughout this discussion as a touchstone.

His seminal work, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West*, was one of the first books to contest the view that animist ontologies violate principles of scientific naturalism. For Horton, both animist and scientific approaches stand as attempts to unravel the mysteries of empirical phenomena: To expose the hidden, to explain causal relations, and to predict phenomena. In that sense, animic and scientific approaches were taken to be equally naturalistic, and shared significant overlap as tools of explanation for the same domain.

Whether or not animism is compatible with naturalism, there seems to be an altogether different problem between animism and science. It may be thought that any degree of scientific awareness will be enough to dispel the possibility that the animists are even partly on the right track. Not only do the commitments of animism appear to violate certain commitments of the sciences, but these commitments themselves also appear to be explicable by appeal to theories in psychology and CSR. In other words, we can *debunk* the animist's claims, and we can do so by appeal to many of the standard explanations of CSR. Examples abound. Perhaps we have evolved such that we have inherited a "better safe than sorry" strategy in our identification of agency (à la Stewart Guthrie). Perhaps we have "hyperactive agency-detection devices" in our brains (à la Justin Barrett [2004]). Or perhaps claims which violate the commitments of our innate ontologies about life and agency are attention-grabbing enough to be good candidates for cultural transmission (à la Pascal Boyer [2004]). Whichever way you want to go, persuasive and respectable evolutionary debunking arguments explaining animist belief away are two-a-penny. We can show that the emergence of animist belief has been caused by off-track cognitive processes.

In a chapter that challenges the above idea, Hans Van Eyghen (Chap. 12) defends animism from these attacks. The findings of CSR, Van Eyghen argues, have little epistemic bite against the animist's *seeming* that certain aspects of the environment harbor mentality and are communicative. Leaning on a similar "innocent until proven guilty" strategy as I do in my own argument, Van Eyghen borrows some ideas from Richard Swinburne, which provide a framework for the appraisal of rational religious beliefs. In particular, Van Eyghen shows that the supposed

undermining evidence presented by CSR is not sufficient to undermine many examples of animist belief.

In short, where the epistemological questions are concerned, there is a rich debate to be found. The defenders of a realist, doxastic conception of animism (Steinhart, Van Eyghen, and myself) find opponents in those who think we are just plain mistaken (Oppy), as well as in those who may veer toward more practice-based or relational views (Fales, Dawes). But the relations between the arguments are more tangled than just that, with various degrees of convergence and divergence. The direction in which future debate may lead depends on the positions themselves being reworked, reviewed, and refined. There is fertile ground to explore!

4 Animism and Society

A philosophical exploration of animism would not be complete without some discussion of its relationship with ecology and the rights of indigenous peoples. Whatever you think about the plausibility of animism, there may be other reasons to take it seriously. Val Plumwood once wrote:

> The appearance of ecological crises on the multiple fronts of energy, climate change and ecosystem degradation suggests we need much more than a narrow focus on energy substitutes. We need a thorough and open rethink which has the courage to question our most basic cultural narratives. (2010: 32)

One such narrative needing interrogated, Plumwood contended, was the fundamental divorce between humanity and environment. Plumwood urged us to see "nature in the active voice". This reorientation of our most fundamental assumptions could promote ecological and feminist causes. For Plumwood, modern Western societies make a range of binary hierarchies between such things as nature and culture, man and woman, reason and intuition. She sought to undo this state of affairs. Plumwood was not the only—but she was perhaps the most vocal—philosopher to argue that engaging with nature as agentive and communicative should have

clear pragmatic benefits. Undoing these hierarchies was a political necessity.

Incredibly, Plumwood was once the victim of a near-fatal crocodile attack in Australia's Northern Territory. Deborah Rose Bird, a close friend and colleague of Plumwood, narrates the event:

> Val Plumwood had the experience of actually being taken by a crocodile. While canoeing in Kakadu National Park during the season when crocodiles become territorial, she was attacked and taken into the death roll three times before escaping up the river bank. Wounded and bleeding, she crawled for hours trying to reach the ranger station, and was finally rescued and rushed to hospital. This experience had a formative impact on her understanding of being a creature in a world in which other creatures have their own intelligence and objectives. (2013: 101–102)

This personal interaction with the crocodile, in which Plumwood was prey, added to her conviction that we needed to treat nature as more than a passive resource. We needed to extend the realm of respect to those deserving of it.

Pragmatic arguments for animism take many forms, whether they are seen as conducive to fighting ecological problems, undoing patriarchy, or defending indigenous rights. Some of these arguments, decent as they may seem, are rebutted by Oppy in the present volume (and very persuasively, might I add). For Oppy, what seems to matter from a pragmatic perspective is *what* we value, and not the *reasons* we have for valuing it. Take Plumwood's crocodile as just one example: We may well believe that a crocodile is a non-human person, or an agent with spirit, or whatever. But taking up such a position hardly prevents us from viewing this person or spirit as a malevolent one, and thereby, perhaps, affording us some right for a vengeful response. Plumwood might well have decided that the crocodile was declaring war. As the new animist Graham Harvey writes: "The recognition of personhood and of human participation in an 'all-encompassing moral community' need not be a cosy, romantic vision of peaceful co-operation and unity. Not only is enmity relational, but persons can be prey and/or predator" (2005: 28). If Oppy is right, then we may wonder, just *where* is the link between environmentalism and

animism? What would make an animist's view of the world particularly desirable in an effort to scrub out inequality or to solve environmental problems? Are we simply embracing some kind of caricature of animism as the philosophy of the indigenous "noble savage"? Van Eyghen, at the end of his chapter defending animism, considers the idea that it may be simpler to regard spirited things as having *intrinsic value* by virtue of the fact. Perhaps this is true, but as noted by Oppy, much depends on *which things* are regarded as spirited. To give a blunt example, when the volcano erupts and destroys the forest, this may be of little concern so long as it is the volcano rather than the forest that we acknowledge as a person.

To conclude the book, two authors pen chapters that address, in concrete terms, how animistic ways of thinking could affect society in the future. Sven Nyholm (Chap. 13) asks whether we should be animists about robots. Kathryn Rountree (Chap. 14) asks what attitude a cosmopolitan society should take up with respect to animist traditions. These are not distant or far-off questions. Indeed, political questions pertinent to these very cases have already been decided. Should a cosmopolitan society recognize animist commitments to the personhood of the non-living? In New Zealand, the answer was apparently "yes". Incredibly enough, in 2017, the country effected the metaphysical commitments of its indigenous people into law. According to the language of the *Te Awa Tupua Act* of 2017: The Whanganui river is recognized as "an indivisible and living whole, comprising the Whanganui River from the mountains to the sea, incorporating all its physical and metaphysical elements". The river is "a spiritual and physical entity that supports and sustains … life and natural resources". And the Act makes it such that the river "is a legal person and has all the rights, powers, duties, and liabilities of a legal person".

During the time that New Zealand was extending the realm of personhood in one direction, another country was moving things in a different direction altogether. By cosmic coincidence, 2017 was the same year that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia granted citizenship and legal personhood to a humanoid robot named Sophia. The decision—a public relations gimmick by the Kingdom, to be sure—was at least partly due to Sophia's uncanny social abilities. Unlike the unhuman river, it was precisely Sophia's humanlikeness that recommended her for the status of

personhood. More recently, in a case that received worldwide media attention, the software developer Blake Lemoine was placed on paid leave from Google, after releasing confidential information in support of his claim that LamDA (a chatbot under development) was a sentient person, deserving of legal rights and protections.

All of this points toward animism needing to be taken more seriously, whether for reasons relating to environmentalism and the rights of indigenous peoples, or for reasons relating to the increasingly sophisticated creations found in the world of artificial intelligence. We are, as a society, coming to reappraise what the animists have said, and the reasons behind this reappraisal are often new and surprising. The more we listen to the animists, the more we will come to understand animism as a way of living in community with others. The very first step in this conversation is to acknowledge animists as reasonable and sensible, even if we ultimately disagree with what they say. "Taking animists seriously", says Rountree, in this volume, "is a prerequisite and, hopefully, a precursor to taking animism seriously".

And if the reader still wonders: But *why* should we take animism seriously? There is only one answer I can bring forward that really matters: Because our thinking will be richer for it. And that is already enough.

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