

“Animism” in *Encyclopedia of World Environmental History*, edited by Shepard Krech, J.R. McNeill, and Carolyn Merchant. (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 55-56.

temporary paganism are premised upon such assumptions. Such a worldview contrasts with other belief systems that posit that soul or spirit resides only outside nature or within certain exceptionally designated beings (e.g., humans), or is merely an extension of an external deity.

### Historical Presence of Animism

Various forms of animism have found their way into the natural philosophies of numerous environmental thinkers throughout history. Whether in reaction to the reductionist approaches to nature of Renaissance thinkers, or to the perceived anthropocentrism of Christianity, a thread of animism—sometimes known as “vitalism,” “organicism,” or “paganism”—has repeatedly woven its way into the fabric of the Western worldview.

For example, the English philosopher Henry More (1614–1687) believed in an *anima mundi* or “a Soul of the World, or Spirit of Nature.” Along with his colleague John Ray, and in opposition to “Atomick Theists” such as French philosopher René Descartes, More argued for the existence of a more than mechanical organizational presence in all plants and animals. He believed there was a force comprising “a substance incorporeal but without sense and animadversion, pervading the whole matter of the universe, and exercising a plastical power therein” (1925). The thought of the English naturalist and parson Gilbert White (1720–1793) is also often felt to contain animistic elements.

The English poet William Blake (1757–1827) famously coupled the belief that nature is inspirited with a reaction against a reductionist view of nature. His poem “Mock On” is a blunt rebuke of the atomism of Democritus, Rousseau, and Voltaire, while his poem “Earth’s Answer” animates the angry Earth herself to reject “starry jealousy” and “the father of ancient men” (Christianity) and its inherent reductionism (1994). Expanding on his belief that life attached to more than what are typically regarded as living, Blake also asserted that “Everything that lives is holy.”

This British animism made its way to America. Oscillating between transcendent and immanent concepts of spirit or divinity, U.S. naturalist and writer Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) fought scientific reductionism even as he found himself embedded within it. Commenting on an encounter with phosphorescent wood while camping in 1857, Thoreau (1972) “rejoiced in that light as if it had been a fellow creature.” For a moment Thoreau confesses to believing “that the

## Animism

Animism can be defined as the belief either that all natural things and phenomena are alive, or that they possess an innate soul or spirit. Religious traditions ranging from various aboriginal belief systems to con-

woods were not tenantless, but chock-full of honest spirits as good as myself any day. . . ." Deeply attracted to Amerindian animistic traditions, Thoreau believed that their life with and beliefs about nature gave Indians a more accurate rendering of natural workings than that delivered by Western science.

Late in his life, American naturalist John Burroughs (1837–1921) came to view nature as "a huge organism pulsing with life, real and potential," and as "a living joy, something to love." Burroughs professed to seeking to overthrow the "physico-chemical explanation of life and consciousness," and to "transmute and spiritualize science."

Contemporary environmental philosophies such as deep ecology, or even scientific theories such as the Gaia hypothesis, are often regarded as sympathetic to animistic beliefs. Moreover, perhaps because of a desire to embrace a religious tradition consistent with one's worldview, animistic nature religions such as paganism are attracting many new adherents from among the ecologically minded.

### Environmental Relevance of Animism

Given that values and a sense of right and wrong—or a system of ethics—flow from and are consistent with a specific worldview, an animistic worldview clearly has moral implications. The possession of soul or spirit is believed to endow its possessor with intrinsic or sacred value, or value in and of itself. The religion scholar Graham Harvey (1997, 133) suggests that the contemporary pagan "world view is one in which everything that lives deserves honor and rights not normally given to other-than-human life."

Contrasting this sense of value with that emanating from non-animistic traditions helps one to understand this position. Those systems that do not posit soul or spirit within natural entities and phenomena need either to find some other way to establish intrinsic value, or be viable only within a framework attributing greater or lesser amounts of instrumental, utilitarian, or use value. As environmental historian Donald Worster (1994, 29) put it, those belief systems "denying to non-human entities a soul or indwelling spirit . . . helped reduce man's perception of nature to the status of mechanical contrivance." Harvey (1997, 171) intimates the practical dimension of an animistic paganism. Pagans act "as if" the story they tell is true: as if their deities exist, as if magic works, and as if nature is worth celebrating. In doing so, they might find that the intuition or hypothesis fits; things do work this

way and life is enhanced by this approach. Acting as if everything is alive and related tends to lead away from an obsession with deities and towards an interest in a wider diversity of other-than-human persons.

The specific environmental actions that animists might engage in cannot necessarily be glimpsed through an understanding of their belief that nature is inspirited. Animistic environmental ethics, however, will at least begin with a broad assumption about what constitutes the category of "living things" and an enlarged sense of moral inclusiveness.

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### Further Reading

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### Antarctica

Antarctica is the continent of superlatives. It is the coldest, windiest, highest, driest, and remotest place on