

Definition

Animism is most generally be defined as the belief either that all natural things and phenomena are alive, or that they possess an innate soul or spirit, or both. Various religious traditions — from many of the world's aboriginal belief systems to contemporary Pagans — are premised upon animistic assumptions. Such a worldview component stands in stark contrast to other belief systems that posit soul or spirit residing only outside of nature, or within certain exceptionally designated beings (e.g., humans), or as merely an extension of an external deity.

Historical Presence of Animism

Through an ancient belief system, harkening back in the West to the Greek pre-Socratic philosopher Pythagoras, various forms of an animistic belief find their way into the natural philosophies of numerous and diverse environmental thinkers throughout history. Often prompted as a reaction to the reductionistic and mechanistic approaches to nature of Renaissance thinkers and their interpreters, or as a reaction to the perceived anthropocentrism of Christianity, and sometimes referred to as "vitalism," "organicism," or "paganism," a thread of animism has noticeably and 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 or the World, or Spirit of Nature." Along with his colleague John Ray, and in opposition to the "Atomick Theists" such as French philosopher René Descartes, More articulated not only a more than mechanical organizational presence in all individual plants and animals, but a force as "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 Selborne England naturalist and parson Gilbert White (1720-1793) is often said to contain animistic elements. The English poet William Blake (1757-1827) famously coupled the belief that nature is inspirited with a visceral reaction against the mechanical reductionism 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 we typically think of as living things, Blake (1795) also asserted that "Everything that lives is holy."

This British animism made its way to America. Often oscillating between a more transcendental idea of spirit or divinity, and one very much rooted in this world, American 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, at least, Thoreau confesses to believing "that the woods were not tenantless, but choke-full of honest spirits as good as myself any day...an inhabited

house." Deeply attracted to Native American animistic traditions, Thoreau believed that via their life with and beliefs about nature, Native Americans obtained a more accurate rendering of natural workings than that delivered by his own 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 "physico-chemical explanation of life and consciousness," and "transmute and spiritualize science."

Even contemporary expressions of formal environmental philosophies such as Deep Ecology or scientific theories such as the Gaia Hypothesis are often interpreted to contain, or to be sympathetic and consistent with, animistic beliefs. Certainly there are others who, both historically and contemporarily, embrace animistic attitudes. Moreover, perhaps because of a desire to accept a religious tradition consistent with ones worldview, animistic nature religions such as Paganism are currently some of the most rapidly growing religious belief systems.

Environmental Relevance of Animism

Is, and how is, animism relevant from an environmental standpoint? Given that values and a sense of right and wrong — or systems 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 often viewed as a value adding property. In fact, it is exactly the type of property which is believed to endow its possessor with intrinsic or sacred value; defined as value in addition to 'use value,' or value in and of itself. As an example, religion scholar Graham Harvey (1997, 133) suggests that the contemporary Pagan "world view is one in which everything that lives deserves honour and rights not normally given to other-than-human life."

To understand this position, we might view this sense of value in contrast to that which emanates from non-animistic traditions. Those systems failing to posit soul or spirit within natural entities and phenomena need either to find some other way to establish intrinsic value, or they are left with the ability only to work within a framework attributing greater or lesser amounts of instrumental, utilitarian, or use value. As environmental historian Donald Worster (1994, 29) has 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, 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.

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

Further Reading

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