

Animism: Its Scope and Limits

The aim of this paper is to work out what we should be animists about. I begin by distinguishing between ontological and ideological formulations of animism; I suggest that plausible forms of animism will be merely ideological. Next, I consider the extent to which idealism, pantheism and panpsychism might be taken to support universal animism; I claim that there is no plausible form of universal animism. After noting that animals are the easy case for animism, I turn to a discussion of a range of hard cases: flora, geological features, astronomical bodies, word tokens, artefacts, and institutions; I suggest that we should not be animists about anything of these things. Finally, I consider whether the discussion that I have given is insensitive to the kinds of reasons that people have had for holding animistic beliefs about things other than animals.

(1) Animism

Some formulations of animism have an ontological bent. In subsequent discussion, I shall call these *ontological formulations* of animism.

According to some ontological formulations of animism, there are *spirits*: non-physical beings such as demons, ghosts, fairies and angels. Opinion about the perceivability of spirits varies. Some animists take some spirits to be imperceptible; some animists take some spirits to be perceptible only to those to whom the spirits are willing to reveal themselves; and some animists take all spirits to be perceptible to all.

According to some ontological formulations of animism, there are *minds* or *souls*: non-physical components of entities that also have physical components. Opinion about the capacity for independent existence of minds and souls varies. Some animists suppose that minds and souls can only exist as components of entities that also have physical components. Other animists suppose that minds and souls are capable of independent existence, i.e. existence in which they are not components of entities that also have physical components.

Some formulations of animism have an ideological bent. In subsequent discussion, I shall call these *ideological formulations* of animism.

According to some ideological formulations of animism, some—or perhaps all—things are *spirited*: these things manifest certain properties that characterise spirited things. Opinion about the properties that characterise spirited things vary. Some animists suppose that spirited things are capable of *independent movement*. Some animists suppose that spirited things are *alive*. Some animists suppose that spirited things are capable of *acting*. Some animists suppose that spirited things are capable of *experiencing* and *cognising*.

According to some ideological formulations of animism, some—or perhaps all—things are *sentient*: these things manifest sentience. Roughly speaking, things that manifest sentience are things that *experience*: things that see and hear and feel and smell and taste and so on.

According to some ideological formulations of animism, some—or perhaps all—things are *minded*: these things manifest mindedness. Roughly speaking, things that manifest mindedness are things that *cognise*: things that perceive and believe, and so forth.

If we suppose that there are minds or souls, or if we suppose that there are things that are spirited or sentient or minded, the most important question to ask is about the distribution of these things. To simplify this part of our discussion, we shall frame this question in the following way: which things are *animated*? There are a number of different dimensions to this question.

A first sub-question is whether *all* things are animated. Our answer to this question depends upon what things we suppose there are. If we are idealists who suppose that there are none but minds, then we shall suppose that everything is animated. If we are monists who suppose that there is just one minded thing, then we shall suppose that everything is animated. However, if, for example, we suppose that there are various physical things, then it may be that there is a genuine question for us about which physical things are animated.

A second sub-question, for those for whom it is a genuine question which things are animated, is how and where to draw the line between the things that are animated and the things that are not animated. As we noted above, there are various options: being alive, being capable of independent movement, being capable of action, being capable of experiencing, being capable of cognising, and so on. In order to investigate these options, we need accounts of what it is to be alive, to be capable of independent movement, to be capable of action, to be capable of experience, to be capable of cognition, and so forth.

A third sub-question, for those for whom it is a genuine question which things are animated, is mereological, i.e. concerned with relationships between parts and wholes. Should we think that it must be that the parts of something that is animated are themselves animated? Or should we think that something that is animated can be composed of parts that are not themselves animated? These questions interact in interesting ways with the answers that we give to the second question. It may seem straightforward that a living thing can have non-living parts. But there are philosophers prepared to contest the claim that a thing that is capable of experience can have parts that are not capable of experience (or, perhaps, proto-experience).

Given what I have said so far, it follows that most of us have some kind of commitment to ideological animism: most of us have some kind of commitment to the claim that some things are sentient, or minded, or spirited. While there is some room for debate about exactly where the relevant cut-offs lie, it is plausible that there are cut-offs above which it is uncontroversial that certain kinds of things are sentient, or minded, or spirited. In particular, most of us think that it is uncontroversial that sufficiently complex organisms—including ourselves—are sentient, and minded, and spirited. There are organisms—including ourselves—that move, and act, and experience, and cognise.

Does this mean that there is something wrong with what I have said to this point? Not really. The ideological animism to which almost all of us subscribe is completely unremarkable. What is interesting—and what merits our attention—is cases of ideological animism where it is significantly disputed that the things that are taken to be animated move themselves, or act, or experience, or cognise. Consider, for example, animism about artefacts, or flora, or institutions, or geological features, or astronomical objects, or word tokens. In each of these

cases, there is widespread resistance to the suggestion that these kinds of things move themselves, or act, or experience, or cognise.

(2) Animists

Animists are those who stand in an appropriate kind of positive relation to animism. Some animists *believe* animism. Some animists *accept* animism. Some animists *act as if* animism is true.

Some ontological animists believe, or accept, or act as if, there are spirits; some ontological animists believe, or accept, or act as if, there are minds or souls. Some ontological animists believe, or accept, or act as if, there are spirits and minds and souls.

Some ideological animists believe, or accept, or act as if, there are spirited things; some ideological animists believe, or accept, or act as if, there are minded things. Some ideological animists believe, or accept, or act as if, there are sentient things. Some ideological animists believe, or accept, or act as if, there are spirited things and minded things and sentient things.

I noted earlier that most of us have some kind of commitment to ideological animism. I think that more or less all of us believe that some things are sentient: more or less all of us believe that some sufficiently complex organisms—including ourselves—are sentient. Those who are eliminativists about belief deny that we do have such beliefs; however, even eliminativists about belief plausibly accept, and act as if, sufficiently complex organisms are sentient. Moreover, while those who are eliminativists about belief may have some qualms about some alleged dimensions of mindedness and spiritedness, eliminativists about belief plausibly accept, and act as if, sufficiently complex organism are alive, capable of independent movement, capable of acting, capable of experiencing, capable of perceiving, capable of cognising, and so forth. In order to differ significantly from the rest of us, ideological animists must believe, or accept, or act as if, for example, artefacts, or flora, or institutions, or geological features, or astronomical objects, or word tokens move independently, act, experience, perceive, cognise, or the like.

The extent of commitment to ontological animism is more controversial. Many of us believe, or accept, or act as if there are minds or souls, that is, non-physical parts or components of entities that also have physical parts or components. Some of us believe, or accept, or act as if, over the course of their existence, minds or souls can be non-physical components of distinct, non-overlapping entities that also have physical components. Some of us believe, or accept, or act as if, minds or souls are capable of independent existence, that is, capable of existing while not being components of entities that also have physical components. In particular, those of us who believe, or accept, or act as if there is reincarnation or an afterlife are typically committed to believing, or accepting, or acting as if we have minds or souls that can be transferred between physical bodies or that can exist independently of physical bodies.

Among those who believe, or accept, or act as if there are minds or souls, there is disagreement about which kinds of things have minds or souls. Some believe, or accept, or act as if, on the surface of the earth, the only things that have minds or souls are human beings. Some believe, or accept, or act as if, on the surface of the earth, the only things that have minds or souls are sufficiently complex organisms—perhaps, say, all organisms at least

as complex as roundworms. Some believe, or accept, or act as if, on the surface of the earth, there are many other things that have minds or souls: artefacts, flora, institutions, geological features, and so forth. Some believe, or accept, or act as if, perhaps elsewhere in the universe, there are other things that have minds or souls: astronomical bodies of various kinds, aliens, artificial intelligences, and so on. Some believe, or accept, or act as if, even on the surface of the earth, there are free-floating, unembodied minds or souls: demons, ghosts, fairies, angels, and the like.

A common problem for all ontological animists is how to account for interaction between physical bodies and non-physical minds or souls. It is not obvious that this problem takes on a different complexion depending upon the range of things that one takes to have minds or souls. If a non-physical mind or soul can ‘steer’ a physical body, what reason is there to suppose that a non-physical mind or soul cannot project a voice from a rock or pump out mathematical equations from the heart of a quasar? It is true that Descartes supposed that, in human beings, the locus of interaction is a small endocrine gland centrally located in the brain of most vertebrates. But he offered no good reason—and I think that there is no good reason—to prefer that hypothesis to the hypothesis that the locus of interaction is the entire brain, or to the hypothesis that the locus of interaction is the entire organism, or to the hypothesis that the locus of interaction is the extended organism, including the various environmental aids to its moving, perceiving, remembering, cognising, and so forth. It will not do to claim that our knowledge of correlations between states of minds or souls and states of the pineal gland—or the brain, or the organism, or the extended organism—supports a particular choice: for, in fact, even if we have minds or souls, we have no knowledge at all concerning relevant correlations between particular states of minds or souls and particular states or sub-states of pineal glands, or brains, or organisms, or extended organisms. It is true, for example, that human speech has significant roles for the lungs, larynx, tongue, and so forth, and that rocks have none of those things. But if minds or souls can set lungs, larynxes and tongues in motion, it is hard to see any in principle difficulty to their directly setting sound waves in motion. Given ontological animism, there is no serious impediment to the supposition that suitably endowed rocks—that is, rocks to which a non-physical mind or soul is ‘attached’—can talk.

A common problem for merely ideological animists whose ideological animism extends to non-standard cases—artefacts, flora, institutions, geological features, astronomical bodies, word tokens, and so forth—is how to account for the animation of the non-standard cases in question. If one thinks, for example, that a particular rock is animated, what is it about that particular rock that explains its animation? While ontological animists have a ready answer to that question, merely ideological animists cannot avail themselves of the ontological animists’ answer. Part of the difficulty here for merely ideological animists is that there is a commonsense distinction between animals and rocks that should be preserved. Even if our merely ideological animist suppose that all rocks are animated, it is not plausible that the same account can be given of the animation of animals and the animation of rocks. While we have well-developed accounts of the animation of animals, it is not clear what there could be for merely ideological animists to say on behalf of the animation of rocks.

(3) Universal Animation

There are at least three different kinds of views that might be taken to support the claim that everything is animated. I shall consider, in turn: (1) Idealism; (2) Pantheism; and (3) Panpsychism.

Idealism: For the purposes of this discussion, I shall take idealism to be the view that, at the most fundamental level, there is nothing but minds. Idealists divide on the question whether, at the most fundamental level, there is just one mind or there are many minds. This division among idealists has no significance for our discussion.

According to our idealists, at the most fundamental level there is experience and cognition, but not life, movement, action, and sentience. So, according to our idealists, at the most fundamental level, we find some but not all of the characteristics that animists attribute to animated things. If we have our eye only on the most fundamental level, it is thus not entirely clear whether we should say that idealists are animists.

Typically, idealism is not merely a theory about what is fundamental; typically, idealists try to tell a story that, in some sense, gives us back the familiar world in which we live. While there are difficulties involved in trying to make this more precise, there is some sense in which idealists allow that, at some non-fundamental level, our universe exists. While it is not fundamentally true that there are fauna, flora, geological features, astronomical bodies, artefacts, institutions, word tokens, and so forth, it is nonetheless non-fundamentally true that there are all of these things. But, of course, at the level at which it is non-fundamentally true that there are all of these things, idealists need not be committed to animism about all—or even any—of these things.

While, on a superficial examination, it might seem that idealism is a species of animism, I think that, on more careful consideration, we should be cautious about claiming that idealists are animists. There is nothing in idealism that commits idealists to animism at non-fundamental levels; and it is not clear whether there is sufficient reason to say that idealists are committed to animism at the fundamental level. (For more careful discussion of idealism, see, for example: Goldschmidt and Pearce (2017), Hofweber (2019), Smithson (2021), and Rickless (2013).)

Pantheism: Very roughly, pantheism is the claim that everything is divine. As a first step to making this more precise, we distinguish between collective and distributive readings of ‘everything’. On the collective reading, pantheism is the claim that the sum of all beings—the being of which all other beings are parts—is divine; on the distributive reading, pantheism is the claim that each thing is divine.

In order to determine the implications of pantheism for animism, we need an account of what it is to be divine. If to be divine, one must have the animating properties—life, movement, action, sentience, experience, cognition, and so forth—then divinity entails animation; else, not. There is some plausibility to the thought that theists divide on this question: some theists do suppose that divinity entails animation, while other theists do not. On the one hand, at least some classical polytheists suppose that the gods have all of the animating properties; on the other hand, some classical monotheists (e.g. Thomists) suppose that God has none of the animating properties.

On the collective reading, there is nothing that commits pantheists to animism about anything other than the being of which all other things are parts, and, it seems, there could be division

of opinion concerning the animation of the being of which all other things are parts. It seems clear, for example, that the being of which all other things are parts is not capable of movement or action; it is less clear what to say about whether it is alive, or capable of experience or cognition.

On the distributive reading, whether pantheists are committed to universal animism depends entirely on whether they suppose that divinity entails animation. Some of the considerations that arise in connection with the being of which all other things are parts will also arise in the case of sufficiently large parts of the being of which all other things are parts: these, too, will not be capable of movement or action, but might be deemed alive or capable of experience or cognition.

I think that it is clear that pantheism is not a species of animism. It may be that some pantheists are animists; but it is perfectly possible to be a pantheist while not being an animist. This is obvious in the case of collective pantheism, but also seems eminently plausible in the case of distributive pantheism. (For more careful discussion of pantheism, see, for example: Byerly (2019), Forrest (2016), Levine (1994), Mander (2017 and Oppy (1997).)

Panpsychism: Like animism, panpsychism comes in both ontological and ideological forms. According to ontological panpsychism, minds are ubiquitous: each thing has a unique non-physical mind among its parts; and, according to ideological panpsychism, mindedness is ubiquitous: each thing has capacities for sentience, experience and cognition.

The main question to be asked is much the same for ontological panpsychism and ideological panpsychism. On either view, while all things have capacities for sentience, experience and cognition, there are many things that are not alive, and that do not have capacities for movement and action. Consider rocks. Plausibly, according to panpsychism, rocks have capacities for sentience, experience and cognition, but rocks are not alive, and do not have capacities for movement and action. Whether we suppose that panpsychism entails animism depends entirely upon how much importance we place upon life, movement and action in our account of animism. Are we animists about a controversial category if we suppose that things in that category have capacities for sentience, experience and cognition, but are not alive and lack capacities for movement and action?

However we answer the central question, it seems clear that there is a much stronger case for thinking that panpsychism entails animism than there is for thinking that either pantheism or idealism entails animism. It is, I think, quite clear that idealists and pantheists need not be animists; it is less clear that panpsychists need not be animists. The key consideration is whether we suppose that life and capacities for movement and action are central to the determination of whether something is animated. There is at least some reason to think that life is the most important element in animation. Even etymology points in that direction: the reason why 'breath' and 'spirit' are meanings of 'anima' is because possession of breath and spirit were taken to explain the distinction between the living and the non-living. But, even if life is the most important element in animation, it remains open to us to think that movement and action are no more important than sentience, experience and cognition. And it also remains open to us to suppose that anything that is capable of sentience, experience and cognition is, *ipso facto*, alive. So, for all that I have said, it remains an open question whether it must be that panpsychists are animists. (For more careful discussion of panpsychism, see, for example: Goff et al. (2017), Seager (2019), Skrbina (2003) (2017) and Strawson (2009).)

(4) Hard Cases for Animation

I suggested earlier that there is a clear range of cases in which we are all ideological animists: we are all ideological animists about sufficiently complex biological organisms. It seems to me that roundworms tick most of the boxes: they are alive, they move and act independently, they are sentient, and they have rudimentary cognition. Perhaps it is doubtful whether they have experience; perhaps it is doubtful whether there is something that it is like to be a roundworm. Nonetheless, it seems appropriate to me to suppose that roundworms are animated. However, as we move to less complex organisms, matters become less clear. What should we say about: multicellular organisms that lack central nervous systems, amoeba, bacteria, and viruses? We may be happy to accept that all of these—except perhaps for the viruses—are alive; and we may be happy to allow that most of these are capable of independent motion. But we may well be reluctant to allow that any of these are sentient, or capable of action, experience and cognition—and we will surely become increasingly uncertain about these matters as we move to creatures of diminishing complexity.

It is not surprising that animals are the best case for ideological animism. There is nothing else in which so many of the markers for animation are uncontroversially present. The purpose of the present section is to discuss some of the other cases that have been proposed as candidates for ideological animism. In each case, we are interested in considering which—if any—of the markers of animation are uncontroversially present.

Flora: As with animals, plants vary significantly in their complexity. While there is no question that complex plants are alive, that determination becomes more complicated as we move to plant-like organisms with diminishing complexity, e.g. fungi, yeasts, molds, plankton, etc. For our purposes, it will do no harm for us to suppose that all plants are alive.

The obvious question to ask now is whether plants exhibit any of the other markers of animation: movement, action, sentience, experience and cognition. There is no shortage of recent authors prepared to assert that they do: see, for example Calvo (2016), Chamovitz (2012), Gagliano (2018), Maher (2017), Marder (2013), Tomkins and Bird (2018), and Wohlleben (2016). Nonetheless, it seems highly doubtful that plants are sentient, or that they have capacities for movement, action, experience or cognition. In particular, given the structural, organisational and functional complexity of animal brains upon which the capacity of animals for movement, action, sentience, experience and cognition depend, and given the absence of any comparable structural, organisational and functional complexity in plants, we have very strong reason for thinking that plants do not have capacities for movement, action, sentience, experience and cognition. (See Taiz et al. (2019) for an elaboration of an argument along these lines.) If sentience, experience, cognition and action can all be had without the structural, organisational and functional complexity of animal brains, then it is mysterious why our evolutionary history endowed animals with the kind of structural, organisational and functional complexity that we find them to have.

I anticipate that some may think that the dismissive line that I have taken here on the question of the animation of plants entails that I am obliged to also take a dismissive attitude towards, for example, practices of tree veneration. That is not so. On my reading in the literature on tree and plant veneration—e.g. Dafni (2006) and Fowler-Smith (2009)—it is a mistake to

suppose that those who practice tree veneration must be committed to the claim that trees are animated. On the contrary: the evidence that I have seen suggests that where trees are worshipped, they are worshipped for what is taken to be revealed through them, what they are themselves taken to signify, what powers they are taken to express, and, especially, for what is taken to live in them. None of this requires the assumption that trees are, themselves, animated. Moreover, nothing in what I have said is inconsistent with the further claim that practices of tree veneration provide significant benefits to individuals and communities that practice it. (For more on this kind of theme, see Seward (1937).)

Geological Features: There are diverse kinds of geological features that are sometimes said to be animated: mountains, volcanoes, rock formations, caves, and bodies of water such as oceans, rivers, lakes, geysers, springs and wells. While there is movement associated with many of these things—in particular, volcanoes and the different kinds of bodies of water—there is not much reason to suppose that any of them are alive, and there is even less reason to attribute sentience, experience, cognition and action to them. In this case—and in the other cases still to be discussed—there has been no recent surge of authors arguing that we should suppose that these things are alive, sentient, capable of spontaneous movement and action, and endowed with capacities for experience and cognition, and hence no kickback from scientific experts in the study of these kinds of geological features.

That mountains, volcanoes, rock formations, caves, and bodies of water such as oceans, rivers, lakes, geysers, springs and wells have long been objects of religious veneration is not in dispute. Details can be found in, for example, the following sources: for mountains, Reinhard (1985); for volcanoes, Vitaliano (1973); for rock formations, Valdiya (2016); for oceans, Andaya (2016); for rivers, Bradley (2012), and for wells, Varner (2009). However, in almost all cases, the veneration of these geological features is similar to the veneration of trees: these geological features can be venerated for what is taken to be revealed through them, what they are taken to signify, what power they are to express, and what is taken to live in them or to rule over them. We do not need to suppose that the geological features are themselves animated in order to suppose that they are worthy objects of veneration. As in the case of trees—and forests—it is plausible that veneration of geological features can provide significant benefits to individuals and communities that practice it. It is worth noting, for example, that some communities benefit from frequent volcanic activity in the areas in which they live: the enrichment of soil by volcanic ash is something that can be welcomed by isolated farming communities. (For more on this kind of theme, see Worton (2008).)

Astronomical Bodies: There are diverse kinds of astronomical bodies that might be taken to be animated, including: meteorites, comets, the moon, the sun, the planets, individual stars, stellar constellations, and the Milky Way. Human beings have certainly worshipped sun gods, moon gods, and planet gods; and they have often treated meteorites as objects of special significance for gods. Moreover, mostly in more distant times, human beings have worshipped individual star gods, stellar constellation gods, and Milky Way gods. At least sometimes, this worship may have gone along with the belief that these astronomical bodies are animated: they are alive, they are capable of independent action and movement, and they are subjects of sentience, experience and cognition. However—as in our previous cases—we do not need to suppose that astronomical bodies are animated in order to suppose that they are worthy objects of veneration. We are free to suppose that astronomical bodies can be venerated for what is taken to be revealed through them, what they are taken to signify, what power they are supposed to express, and what is taken to be related to them or to rule over them. (For further discussion of cases, see, for example: on meteorites, Farrington (1900), on

the sun, Olcott (1914); on the moon, Garfinkle (2020); on the planets, Kotyk (2017), on stars, Faulkner (1966); on constellations, Aveni (1999); and on the Milky Way, Waller (2017).)

I anticipate that some will object that this discussion of astronomical bodies fudges the most important question: were there people who *literally* worshipped meteorites, comets, the moon, the sun, the planets, individual stars, stellar constellations and the Milky Way? I think that this question does not admit of a definitive answer. First year philosophy students struggle to master the concept of numerical identity; anecdotal evidence suggests that some never do. Relevant discussions of astronomical gods—both in ancient texts and in modern commentaries—are not written with the kind of philosophical precision that permits a straightforward determination of exactly what was being worshipped in veneration focussed on meteorites, comets, the moon, the sun, the planets, individual stars, stellar constellations, and the Milky Way. We can say, speaking loosely, that people worshipped these things; but that leaves it open, speaking strictly, whether this veneration concerned what is revealed through these things, what these things are taken to signify, what powers these things are taken to express, and what is taken to be related to these things or to rule over them. In the absence of opportunity to press people further on these matters, we should not hastily assume that their pronouncements on these matters meet contemporary standards for strict speech.

Word Tokens: It has long been taken for granted, at least by philosophers and linguists, that words are arbitrary signs. However, in the *Cratylus*, Plato has Socrates take seriously the view that words are intrinsically related to the things to which they give expression. More widely, there are various traditions in which there are *true words*: words that have some very intimate relation to that which they name, or denote, or express. In particular, there are traditions in which gods and people have true names and are vulnerable to anyone who has knowledge of their true names. It is sometimes maintained that, according to these traditions, names are animated things. Similar things are sometimes said about traditions concerning religious invocations, magical incantations, and mystical mantras.

It is clearly not a straightforward task to explain how there could be true words. Nonetheless, it seems that there is little to justify the literal claim that, if there were true words, they would be animated. It does not seem right to suppose that tokens of true words would be alive, capable of independent movement, able to act, sentient, or subjects of experience or cognition. While there may be frequent conjunction of belief in true words with various kinds of animistic beliefs—as, for example, in contemporary Wicca (for which, see, for example, White (2015))—that is simply not a good reason for claiming that belief in true words is itself a species of animistic belief.

Artefacts: Sautchuk (2019) discusses the decision of a group of Amazonian lake fishermen to ban the use of nets to catch piraruca (fish). The fishermen's reasons for the decision can be briefly summarised as follows: (1) nets fish by themselves; (2) use of nets is cowardice; and (3) nets scare away piraruca. The first reason might be taken to suggest that animistic belief plays a role in the fishermen's decision: they suppose that nets are animated. But, as Sautchuk makes clear, that is not the best construal of the first reason. Rather, what matters to the fishermen is that the use of nets renders fishermen passive in comparison with those who use a harpoon: once the net is fixed at the bottom of the lake, it remains static, merely waiting for the piraruca to come. This is, at least roughly, what the fishermen mean when they say that nets fish by themselves.

The claim that some artefacts are animated—alive, capable of independent movement and action, sentient, and subjects of experience and cognition—is hard to take seriously. But—as my discussion of the Amazonian lake fishermen is meant to suggest—we do not need to take that claim seriously in order to make sense of ways in which we treat artefacts that might be taken to provide *prima facie* support for the claim that we think that some artefacts are animated. Some artefacts are particularly successful in the hands of some users: cricketers have favourite bats, hunters have favourite spears, and so on. Some artefacts have important historical associations for some users: the Shroud of Turin has a special place in the affections of many Christians, the Black Stone has a special place in the affections of many Muslims, and so forth. Some artefacts have been blessed by those whom we take to have authority to issue such blessings. We do not need to suppose that people take special artefacts to be animated in order to explain why they take those artefacts to be special.

Institutions: There are two broadly different kinds of social groups: *organised* groups—such as firms and corporations, institutions, nations, and universities—and *feature* groups—such as races, genders, and redheads. While there seems to be little reason to attribute we-attitudes and collective intentionality to feature groups, there is more reason to take seriously the idea that organised groups are, themselves, animated entities. In particular, there is some plausibility to the thought that some organised groups are capable of action and cognition: we are typically happy to say that organised groups deliberate, act on the outcomes of their deliberations, and are to be held to account for the consequences of their actions. However, it is less clear that we are prepared to allow that organised groups are alive, capable of independent movement, sentient, and subjects of experience. Even if we are prepared to accept that organised groups are capable of action and cognition, we may well not be inclined to allow that organised groups are animated. Moreover, we may not be prepared to say that organised groups are capable of action and cognition: we may wish, instead, to insist that the only things that are capable of action and cognition are the individuals who make up the organised groups in question. (For more on the metaphysics of social groups, see Epstein (2017).)

Reduction of the capacity for action and cognition in organised groups to the capacity for action and cognition of the members of those groups opens room for a ‘near-universal’ animism, according to which most things—including animals, plants, rocks, rivers, weather systems, artefacts, and true words—are animated, but organised groups are not. It is perhaps unsurprising that this apparent possibility seems not to have been recognised in discussions of animism beyond the bounds of philosophy. The point has interesting connections to the mereological question for animists that was mentioned earlier. If we think that it cannot be that something that is animated is a proper part of something else that is animated, then we may take ourselves to have independent principled reason to deny that organised groups are animated. Doubtless, there are other issues to be faced: for example, if we take this mereological line, then we might be committed to denying that certain kinds of parasites are parts of their hosts. Consider the bacteria in your gut. If you think that bacteria are animated, and if you accept the mereological claim, then you will be committed to denying that the bacteria in your gut are part of you. Somewhere between 1% and 3% of your body mass is constituted from micro-organisms. If they are not part of you, then it seems wrong to suppose that, for example, they contribute to your weight! Of course, we have already noted that it is highly controversial to suppose that bacteria are animated; perhaps all we have here is additional reason to maintain that they are not.

(5) Motivations for ‘New’ Animism

The line that I have taken in connection with animism might be thought to set me at odds with recent developments in various parts of academia. I shall now discuss various kinds of reasons that people might have for trying to defend or promote ideological animism, for cases other than animals, in connection with ecology, religion, politics, and philosophy.

Ecology: Perhaps the single most important driver of the ‘new’ animism lies in a large nest of contemporary ecological and environmental concerns. Some are specific concerns about animals, for example: factory farming, vivisection, consumption of animal products, domestication of animals, and extinction of species. Some are specific concerns about particular kinds of environmental degradation, for example: air pollution, water pollution, salinization, rising water tables, contamination of aquifers, contaminated landfill, and soil erosion. Some are specific concerns about concrete global problems, for example: climate change, rising sea levels, loss of biodiversity, and human over-population. Some are specific concerns about more abstract global problems, for example: sustainability, renewability, consumption, and conquest.

Some recent advocates have claimed that our best—or perhaps our only—hope for dealing with this nest of concerns is to adopt some kind of animism, or vitalism, or panpsychism. (For animism, see, for example: Bird-David (1999), Capper (2016), Conty (2019), and Harvey (2005); for vitalism, see, for example, Bennett (2010); and, for panpsychism, see, for example, Matthews (2003).) There are at least two important drivers for these kinds of views. On the one hand, there is the thought that we will only come to a proper appreciation of our dependence and relationality if we adopt some kind of animism. And, on the other hand, there is the thought that we will only come to a proper valuing of animals, environments, and our planet if we adopt some kind of animism.

It is not clear that either of these thoughts can be sustained. At least *prima facie*, there is a tension between some of the specific concerns that I have just mentioned and the promotion of animism.

Veganism looks much harder to defend if we suppose that plants are animated. If plants are sentient subjects of cognition and experience, then why should we be any more sanguine about farming plants, conducting scientific experiments on living plants, consuming plant products, domesticating plants, and the extinction of plant species than we are about the farming of animals, conducting scientific experiments on living animals, consuming animal products and the extinction of animal species? If we think that veganism is a proper expression of our valuing of animals, environments and the planet, then it seems that we ought to be moved to restrict animism to animals, or, at any rate, not to extend animism to plants.

Worries about environmental degradation also seem harder to defend if we suppose that things like lakes, rivers, oceans, and the atmosphere are animated. Consider air pollution. It is not at all clear why we should suppose that, if the atmosphere is animated, it has any concerns about its level of CO₂ concentration. Levels of greenhouse particle concentration in the atmosphere have been much higher in past times; we have no reason at all to suppose that the atmosphere preferred times at which levels of greenhouse particle concentration were

lower than those times when levels of greenhouse particle concentration were higher. Similar points apply to soil erosion, salinization, depletion of aquifers, rising sea levels, and so forth. The most that animism is going to give us is that animals and plants have concerns about these kinds of things. But, by broader animist lights, that looks like mere partiality on the side of animals and plants.

Global worries about rising sea-levels, loss of biodiversity, and so forth, seem no easier to explain and defend if we adopt the Gaia hypothesis—the hypothesis that the earth is animated—than if we do not adopt that hypothesis. Is there any reason, short of human parochialism, why we should suppose that the earth prefers eras in which there are living things on or near its surface to eras in which there are no living things on or near its surface? Again, the most that animism is going to give us is that animals and plants have concerns about these kinds of things. But it seems like an act of gratuitous projection to suppose that the earth is going to share those concerns.

These anxieties about the capacity of animism to underwrite appropriate concerns for animals, plants and the environment are not the most urgent worries about the ‘new’ animism. The most important concern is that what we collectively lack is manifestly not something that mere alternative metaphysical and ontological commitments can supply. There is ample research that shows, for example, that human psychopaths—rapists and serial killers—do not mistakenly suppose that their victims are not loci of sentience, experience and cognition. Rather, the problem is that psychopaths—rapists and serial killers—simply do not care about other human beings. The deficits of psychopaths—rapists and serial killers—are primarily affective, hence not modifiable by mere inculcation of alternative metaphysical and ontological commitments. Similar considerations apply to the attitudes that most people have towards animals, plants, and the environment: most people simply do not care—or have very selective cares—about animals, plants and the environment.

It is no secret that, collectively, we are responsible for cruel treatment of farm animals, destruction of ecosystems, environmental degradation, precipitous climate change, loss of biodiversity, human over-population, and so forth. Almost all of us know that our collective behaviour will have seriously adverse consequences, not merely for future generations of human beings, but for future generations of almost all species of plants and animals. Moreover, almost all of us know what we can do to mitigate or eliminate our contributions to these adverse consequences: we can go vegan, we can live locally, we can look out for the animals and plants that live where we live, we can advocate for the establishment of large no-go zones for human beings on all continents, and so on. If we do not do these things, it is not because we are not animists; rather, if we do not do these things, it is because we—individually and collectively—lack the will to do so. We should care about—we should care for—animals, plants forests, oceans, rivers, mountains, and so forth, not because these things are all loci of sentience, experience and cognition, but because these things are all valuable in themselves. We should not join the ‘new’ animists in espousing the reductive view that things must be loci of sentience, experience and cognition in order to be loci of value.

Religion: Recent developments in religious studies are a second important driver of the ‘new’ animism. Alongside an explosion of interest in new religious movements—for which, see, for example, Lewis (2004) (2016)—the last few decades have seen an increase in academic promotion of religions that incorporate animistic beliefs: wicca—see, for example, White (2015) and Doyle (2016); paganism—see, for example Clifton and Harvey (2004); Strmiska, M. (2005) and Davies (2011); Western Buddhism—see, for example, Capper (2016),

Kapleau (2009), Kaza (2008), and Snyder (2014); and even Christianity—see, for example, Wallace (2018). Often, what lies at the heart of this enthusiasm for animistic religions is the thought that, without some kind of *spiritual* connection to animals, plants, forests, oceans, rivers, mountains, and so forth, we will not—and perhaps even cannot—be motivated to care about them or to care for them. From this perspective, it is not merely that we need animistic beliefs; we also need religious and spiritual formation to ensure that we will take appropriate action on those animistic beliefs.

This way of looking at things seems to me to be mistaken. The fit between animism and wicca, paganism, and Western Buddhism no more redounds to the credit of animism than the fit between laissez faire economics and prosperity theology redounds to the credit of laissez faire economics. (For more on prosperity theology, see, for example, Bowler (2013).) As I noted above, what is really needed is motivation: we need people to care about, and to care for, animals, plants, forests, oceans, rivers, mountains, and so on. But it seems to me to be counsel of despair to suppose that the best way—or perhaps even the only way—to get people to care about, and to care for, animals, plants, forest, oceans, rivers, mountains, and so forth is to get them to adopt spiritual and religious practices based on the belief that all of these things are animated.

Since there is some risk that I may be misunderstood, I would like to emphasise that it is not my intention to disparage wicca, paganism, and Western Buddhism. First, there is nothing in what I have said here that entails, or even suggests, that wicca, paganism, and Western Buddhism are inferior to other religions and spiritualities. Second, there is nothing in what I have said here that entails, or even suggests, that those who practice wicca, or paganism, or Western Buddhism should be discouraged from those practices. There is no perfect practice; there are costs to everything that we choose to do. Insofar as those who practice wicca, paganism and Western Buddhism do care about, and do care for, animals, plants, forests, oceans, rivers, mountains, and so on, they are, by my lights, on the side of the angels. I think that they are mistaken in supposing that plants, forests, oceans, rivers, mountains, and so forth, are animated; but I see no reason why this cannot just be something upon which we respectfully agree to disagree.

Politics: A third important driver of the ‘new’ animism is politics that are not narrowly concerned with the ecological and religious matters that we have already canvassed. I shall briefly address two of these kinds of concerns.

The first political matter dates from the foundational European anthropological discussions of indigenous cultures (as, for example, in Tylor (1871)). Some of these discussions idealised ‘noble savages’ who had been spared the corrupting influence of European civilisation; most of the discussions disparaged ‘savage brutes’ who lacked the benefits of enlightened European ways of life. Either way, these discussions were viciously ethnocentric and hopelessly inaccurate. Nonetheless, some of those ideas became deeply rooted. One such idea is that ‘primitive thought’ is thoroughly animistic—‘primitive thought’ supposes that plants, forests, oceans, rivers, mountains, rocks, planets, and so forth are animated—and productive of a greater capacity to care about, and to care for, plants, forests, oceans, rivers, and so on. This thought could met in various ways. One way to meet it is to rehabilitate animism: if we suppose that plants, forests, oceans, rivers, mountains, rocks, planets and so forth are animated, then clearly we are not going to be implicated in the denigration of animists in indigenous cultures, and perhaps we will become endowed with a greater capacity to care about, and to care for, all of these things. This kind of thought has occasional visibility in

much recent writing on animism: see, for example, Bird-David (1999), Harvey (2005) (2006), Rose (2017), and Wallace (2019).

I have already indicated some reasons why we should be cautious about this kind of response. It seems improbable that there is any very direct connection between supposing that plants, forests, oceans, and rivers are animated and caring for or about them. Moreover—and more importantly—there is abundant evidence that assumptions of animism can be wedded to highly partial caring. Racist paganism and ethno-nationalism—as described in, for example, Gardell (2003) and Olsen (1999)—are cases in which concern for plants, forests, oceans, rivers, and so forth is a highly localised concern: it is only *our* plants, forests, oceans, rivers, and so on that demand care and attention.

It is also not clear that we do best to interpret the behaviour of indigenous people in terms of the *belief* that plants, forests, oceans and rivers are sentient subjects of experience and cognition. There are a bunch of terms here—‘sentience’, ‘experience’, ‘cognition’—that are manifestly European terms; they may not map at all well onto the terms that indigenous peoples used prior to colonisation. And, in any case, it seems reasonable to expect that we can have practices of caring about, and caring for, plants, forests, oceans, rivers, and so on without supposing that these things are sentient subjects of experience and cognition.

The second political matter is raised in, among other places, the discussion in Kalnay (2019) of the demand—by authors such as Bennett (2010) and Morton (2016)—for a return to a childlike, animistic view of the world, calling out ‘Western culture’s failure to look past an anthropocentric worldview [that] has been responsible for innumerable forms of political injustice and environmental destruction’ (162). I do not think that it should be denied that Western culture has been responsible for innumerable forms of political injustice and environmental destruction. However, it seems odd to me to lay these faults on the anthropocentrism that is to be found in Western worldviews, not least because, for the most part, Western culture has recognised that the political injustices done in its name have been carried out against non-Western human cultures. But the point that I want to emphasise here is that it seems really strange to propose more anthropomorphism as a cure for allegedly problematic Western anthropomorphism. After all, animism just is anthropomorphic projection of human characteristics onto non-human entities: animals, plants, forest, oceans, rocks, planets, stars, and so on. I think that Kalnay’s claims about the virtues of Potter’s mycological aesthetics are well-taken: but, if anything, those claims are an argument for less, rather than more, anthropomorphism in our dealing with the non-human world. Moreover, Kalnay’s claims are not really any sort of argument for anthropomorphic belief: her claim is that children benefit from anthropomorphic imagination and pretence of the kind for which Potter’s books serve as appropriate props. We should all pay more attention to woodlice, earwigs, and fungi; but that does not mean that we should form more anthropocentric beliefs about them.

Philosophy: A final driver of the ‘new’ animism might lie in philosophical views that can be taken to support it. I shall give a very brief discussion of a couple of these kinds of views here.

In my earlier discussion of universal animation, I omitted one case that clearly requires some mention: arguments for universal animation from quantum mechanics (as, for example, in Herbert (1995)). It is, of course, highly controversial to suppose that the best interpretation of quantum mechanics entails universal animation. Even if, implausibly, the best interpretation

of quantum mechanics entails universal consciousness or proto-consciousness, it seems wrong to suppose that the best interpretation of quantum mechanics entails universal life, movement, action, sentience, experience and cognition. And it is extremely implausible that the best interpretation of quantum mechanics entails universal consciousness.

A second philosophical consideration lies in recent discussion of scientism and reductionism. Many of the ‘new’ animists—including, for example, Bennett (2010), Bird-David (1999), Capper (2016), Conty (2019), Harvey (2005) (2006), Kalnay (2019), Morton (2016), Rose (2017), and Sautchuk (2019)—suppose that it is necessary to oppose scientism and reductionism, and that this necessary opposition opens new prospects for animism. If—as many of the ‘new’ animists’ seem to suppose—scientism and reductionism require commitment to the claim that we can ground the normative and evaluative in the scientifically descriptive, then I side with them in opposing scientism and reductionism. However, I do not think that this opposition gives any succour to animism. A proper ground for caring for, and caring about, animals, plants, forests, oceans, ecosystems, and so forth, will be normative and evaluative; it will not, therefore, be any kind of description, scientific, metaphysical, or otherwise. Anthropomorphising—or failing to anthropomorphise—these various kinds of things has no relevance to the justification of normative and evaluative judgments that we make about them.

A third philosophical consideration might be derived from a ‘crooked’ reading of Smith (2020). In recent times, there has been some renewed interest in *consensus gentium* arguments for the existence of God. But, as Smith points out, if we consider the majority opinion of people across all times and places, it seems that we can build a stronger *consensus gentium* case for nature spirits that we can for gods. However, I do not think that the ‘new’ animists should put too much stock in this consideration. Both in the case of nature spirits and in the case of gods, there is nowhere near the kind of consensus that would be needed in order for this kind of argument to carry serious weight.

(6) Concluding Remarks

The discussion that I have given here is no more than an introductory sketch. There is much more work to be done on (a) explications of animism; (b) connections between animism and competing theories and theoretical orientations; (c) evaluation of the theoretical virtues of animism; and (d) applications of discussion of (a)-(c) to what I have here called the ‘new’ animism. I have suggested that we can—and must—find ways to properly value animals, plants, forests, oceans, rivers, eco-systems, and so forth, without anthropomorphising them in the way that, as I see it, animists do. This suggestion endorses the normative and evaluative concerns of the ‘new’ animists, but rejects their ontological and metaphysical assumptions. However, I reiterate that, in my view, coming to properly value animals, plants, forests, oceans, rivers, eco-systems, and so forth, is the main game: those who agree about this should not let their metaphysical and ontological differences divide them.

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