

ANIMALS, ANIMISTS, AND ACADEMICS

by *Graham Harvey*

Abstract. *Animism* is the label given to worldviews in which the world is understood to be a community of living persons, only some of whom are human. (An older use of the term to label a putative “belief in spirits” is less useful.) Animists inculcate locally meaningful means of communicating with other-than-human persons, especially in order to express respect. Ethnographic accounts of particular animist ways of engaging with animal persons are noted. I argue that ethologists interested in engaging respectfully with animals while researching cognition, behavior, and other critical issues may find their research methods and results enhanced by learning from animists about tested methods of communicating with animals. The mediation of animists in this communicative engagement between animals and those who research among them is proposed not as a romantic gloss on modernist culture but in full recognition that the challenge offered by dialogue with marginalized and excluded “others” may result in a reconfiguration of academic protocols. Nonetheless, this entry into full relationality is seriously posed as an improved means of achieving established goals of understanding animals, humans, and the world we coinhabit.

Keywords: animals; animism; Marc Bekoff; ethnography; ethology; methods; nature; other-than-human persons; personalism; persons; relationality; respect; totemism.

Of the four words in my title, the one that generates the central argument of this discussion is the smallest, *and*. Although there are various debates about the nature of animals (their cognitive competence is especially significant here), the nature of animist worldviews, and the place of academics in the contemporary world, the bringing together of all three areas of contention and reflection is the new thing here.

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Marc Bekoff's work illustrates what happens, and what might happen, when academics and animals encounter one another. In my recent research (Harvey 2005) I have considered what happens when animists and animals get together and when animists and academics have encountered each other. The big question I pose here is what would happen if animists and those academics who respect them engaged in significant conversation with animals and those academics who are respectful of them. Possibly the number of academics in both camps is small, but this is changing. In both cases the important point that makes dialogue possible (if not necessary) is that discourse about both animals and animists is challenging normative Western, modernist worldviews, practices, and positions, including those of academics and the academy itself.

Typically, however, these challenges are happening in different places. What would happen if both groups and both challenges met? My aim is to demonstrate only that richer conversations and dialogues could take place than we have been party to so far. This is not to say that this essay is without controversy. Several of the topics that I consider should be debated are barbed and will require considerable renegotiation of matters that many of us academics take for granted.

On the assumption that readers may be familiar with some but not all of the debates to which I have alluded, I offer some orientation before returning to the questions. I acknowledge, however, that even my overviews contain statements that are contentious. Obviously I think that these can be supported and point to literatures and communities where evidence may be found.¹

THINKING ABOUT THINKING ANIMALS

In order to make the best use of space here I want to accept that Marc Bekoff and colleagues have demonstrated the cognitive competence of animals. Any version of the notion that humans are distinctive from other animals is now hard to sustain. Chimpanzees have different cultures, crows use tools, apes use language, dolphins are affectionate, dogs suffer, birds enjoy singing, lemurs can deceive (but don't do it very often), goats can destructively overconsume, and so on. Although there are those who remain wedded to the Cartesian self-deception that only human minds are conscious (indeed, that only humans have or are minds), it is evident that humans are like other animals (just as other animals are like humans) in almost every respect. "Almost every" simply covers the degree to which humans use tools, diversify cultures, overconsume, and so on. Perhaps it is enough to say that we are more or less like other animals in particular cases.

It may also be worth noting that these issues are embedded in the wider debate about the relationship between consciousness and matter. Here I

side with Christian de Quincey (2002) and others who argue that matter and consciousness have always existed together and cannot be separated except for heuristic purposes. Cartesians get that wrong, too. There are, as the popular aphorism says, “turtles all the way down.”

REVISITING ANIMISM

Animism may be a contentious term for scholars of religion. It has been used in several different ways in particular academic disciplines but is most famous for its role in Edward Tylor’s theory of the nature of religion. Tylor chose “animism” to label what he considered to be the essence of religion: “the belief in spiritual beings,” by which he meant nonempirical entities (Tylor [1871] 1958). Although he thought of this false belief as being definitive of religion itself and thus of all religions, he spent a lot of time writing about allegedly primitive stages of religion in which the collective of imagined or believed-in entities was larger, and therefore even more absurd, than those believed in by contemporary Episcopalians and other Christians. Thus, Tylor’s theory of the nature of religion was swiftly mistaken for a theory of the origins of religion, and debate ensued about whether there were even more primitive possibilities than Tylor’s conscious and active but mythical beings. It was not long before all of this effort appeared irrelevant to scholars of culture and religion (initially anthropologists and historians of religion). The term *animism* is now largely ghettoized as an example of an early phase of academic thought and of the entanglement of our academic ancestors with colonialism.

Despite this, the term has escaped from its cage. Not only is it widely used as a term for particular kinds of religion (which is not what Tylor intended), especially with reference to West African traditional religions, but it also has recently aroused new interest among anthropologists. Some of these anthropologists have proposed a new theory of animism that uses the term not to describe the origins of religion but to enable a respectful debate with the worldviews of these and other specific indigenous peoples. This is particularly evidenced in Nurit Bird-David’s article “‘Animism’ Revisited” ([1999] 2002) and in my *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (Harvey 2005). The “new animism” is, as Bird-David’s subtitle suggests, about “personhood, environment, and relational epistemology.” It is at least as much about a relational ontology in which the world is found to be, and treated as, a community of persons not all of whom are human. This new usage has found particular favor in discussions of Amazonian and North Asian cultures, as demonstrated by a number of important and exciting articles and books. (For Amazonia, see Viveiros de Castro 1992; 1998; 1999a, b; 2001; Descola 1992; 1994; 1996; Campbell 1995; Århem 1996; Rival 1999; 2001; Rival and Whitehead 2001. For North Asia, see Humphrey with Onon 1996; Ingold 1998; 1999; Pedersen 2001).

Rather than survey this expanding ethnography and debate, it is entirely sufficient to refer to the now classic work of Irving Hallowell ([1960] 2002; 1992). Spending time with the Ojibwe of Berens River, in southern central Canada, in the 1930s and onward, Hallowell learned to appreciate and respect their worldview. In fact, he insisted that an academic understanding that ignored or belittled indigenous worldviews could not properly consider itself objective. (This is in absolute contrast to Tylor's assertion that ethnology was about replacing the absurdities of other peoples' worldviews.) The essence of an understanding of the new animism is encapsulated in the phrase "other-than-human persons" coined by Hallowell in his reflections on what he learned from his Ojibwe hosts. For Ojibwe animists (among others), the world is a community of persons most of whom are not human. It is a thoroughly communicative community and one that places constraints on each person to become a better person in some way. This "in some way" is important for at least two reasons: (1) humans are expected to become better human persons, caribou to become better caribou persons; and (2) in particular locations, particular cultures (among humans and other-than-humans) have different understandings of what it might mean to be "good," to relate well, to address others with respect, and so on.

It is also important to be clear that "other-than-human persons" is not at all equivalent to Tylor's "spirits"—not because of the considerable uncertainty about what *spirits* might mean but because Hallowell's "persons" include empirical beings or existences such as rocks, trees, bears, and thunderclouds. The problem in discussing Ojibwe and other animist worldviews and lifeways is that European languages and discourse rarely recognize the personhood of some of these other-than-humans.

Elsewhere I have illustrated these dynamics and argued these points more fully (Harvey 2005). Here I am stressing that animism is an appropriate term with which to refer to cultures in which people seek to live respectfully toward those around them. By "people" in this formulation I mean both human and other-than-human, and by "those around them" I do not mean "in their environment," because the word *environment* too often implies (to those of us used to modernity's consumerist worldview) a human-centered vision of resources to be exploited, with or without respect. The ethical implication of animist worldviews is that no "environment" is given to us, or to any other persons, and that whatever we need we must seek in the give and take of relationships and actions and in honest engagement with a diverse community of similarly needy and desiring persons.

In case this sounds overly romantic, I note that among the most eloquent definitions of "the purpose of religious activity" that I have ever read is Te Pakaka Tawhai's statement that it is "to do violence with impunity" ([1988] 2002, 244). The persons among whom we (and all other persons)

live are prey or predator toward others. Respectful (animist) persons must seek ways to eat others with impunity and respect. The mediation of rituals and shamans are central to these negotiations of consuming relationships (but are beyond the scope of this brief discussion). In addition to my wider consideration of animism (Harvey 2005), the encounter of the eco-feminist philosopher Val Plumwood (2000) with a crocodile is worthy of consideration for those who believe that humans are at the top of a food-chain hierarchy. Similarly, various points of this summary will be familiar to readers of Erazim Kohák (1985; 1991; 1992; 1993; 2000), and other personalist and environmentalist philosophers.

I want to note very briefly that there has been a similar revisitation of the term *totemism*. While Philippe Descola (1996), for example, has seen this as a contrasting style of human interaction with animal persons and communities, Deborah Rose (1992; 1997; 1998; 2004) demonstrates that among Aboriginal Australians “totemic relationships connect people [human and other-than-human] to their ecosystems in non-random relations of mutual care” (1998, 14). That is, it is the responsibility of all persons to care for the land and specific places and all who live as part of such lands and places. Some human persons work and live more closely with persons of other species, say, kangaroo persons, than with their immediate human kin. Some kangaroo persons work and live more closely with persons of other species, say, human persons, than with their immediate kangaroo kin. Noting that totemism has been revisited in parallel to the revisitation of animism helps us to understand the particularity of some relationships and the dynamism of aspects of what some indigenous people call clans (totems, *-doodemagin* Ojibwe). A new approach to fetishism is made possible by the animist recognition of some artifacts as persons—illustrated, for example, in discussion of “object persons” (Fulbright 1992, 000) and “total social objects” (Erikson 2001, 000). I contribute to this nascent debate in my book on animism (Harvey 2005, 109–13).

So, the new animism is a strong version of personalism, a relational ontology and epistemology. It is about people working to improve ways of relating with other persons, not all of whom are of the same species. Its leitmotiv is “respect,” admirably glossed as “carefully and constructively” by Mary Black (cited by Ken Morrison 2002, 40). Animist relationality is conducted carefully because some persons are predators, some deceive, and some are powerful. It is constructive because every person (however powerful, moral or immoral) makes the world, others, and themselves as they act with and toward others. Everyone is involved; everyone is a participant. By embedding animism in panpsychism it is possible to add that the cosmos is entirely, inescapably participatory and relational. If there are “turtles all the way down,” there also are hedgehogs (or some other persons) all the way around.

RE-COGNIZING ACADEMIA

In reviewing my set of readings on shamanism (Harvey 2003a), Ronald Hutton wrote that it

poses, in its starkest form, the biggest question that hangs over modern Western scholarship: whether it is, in fact, the work of a particular tribal culture, committed to its own, subjectively effective, views of the cosmos, or whether it has the responsibility for creating some kind of universal explanatory structure for all humanity. The historic problem is that it is actually designed to be the former, and is struggling to be the latter. (Hutton 2003)

I think this makes the same point: we are all involved, all participants. But academics have fallen into the Cartesian trap and imagined the possibility of pure objectivity. They have worked hard to achieve this and to inculcate it in their students. Pure mind, trained scientifically or rationally, ought to be able to observe mere matter completely and accurately once it frees itself from the passionate sensuality of embodiment. Happily for the world, this project has never fully succeeded: “we have never been modern” (Latour 1993). Unhappily for the world, there have been far too many efforts to achieve it (Bauman 1989; Latour 2004). The willingness of some researchers (including, I think, some of those in Bekoff, Allen, and Burghardt 2002) to imprison, torture, infantilize, and frustrate animals should serve as sufficient example of the lengths some will go to in pursuit of realizing modernity. The justification of such practices in the name of science (in Latour’s 2004 formulation of a polemic that pits modernism against the sciences and democracy) illustrates the problem of the place of academics in our participatory world.

I recognize that someone is bound to object that animists can be nasty to animals, and I respond that such animists would be bad animists because they would be relating without respect. However, because a scientist acting in this way is not necessarily widely condemned as a bad scientist, it seems appropriate to conclude that this understanding of science is faulty. The participation of some scientists in vivisection (who else does it?), rooted in Cartesian claims about the nature of animals and humans, demonstrates that the foundations of modernist rationalist science are immoral, at least from other-than-modern and/or animist perspectives.

Because animal experimentation seems an easy target, I want to note that there seems to be a gap in the thinking of Jane Goodall and Marc Bekoff. On page 1 of *The Ten Trusts* (Goodall and Bekoff 2002) Goodall writes, “Native Americans and many other indigenous people of the world acknowledge their relationship with their brothers and sisters the four-footed ones and the winged ones and the finned ones . . . ,” and cites Chief Dan George as urging his people to “talk to the animals” so that “they will talk to you and you will know each other.” But on page 2 she writes, “But even these [communicative] apes [such as chimpanzees, bonobos, and gorillas] cannot, so far as we know, discuss the distant past, make joint plans

for the future, teach their children about things or events that are not present.”

If these animals are limited in what they can teach their children, what could they usefully teach their alleged indigenous “brothers and sisters”? Why do “we” not know what Native Americans know? Is it that we refuse to take seriously the implications of what we seem happy to cite romantically? Have we all fallen into the trap set by Descartes and his collaborators?

More hopefully, when the Cartesian gulf begins to look like a hole someone dug, we begin to see that it is possible to climb out of it, fill it in, and walk away to do something more useful. Gaining a relational and participatory perspective on the job of academia may greatly enhance the effectiveness of our academic work. That is the point of this argument.

ANIMALS, ANIMISTS, AND ACADEMICS

Bekoff and colleagues have demonstrated the cognitive and communicative abilities of animals. Scientists should now be seeking ways to engage in conversation with those animals to find out just what that cognition has so far resulted in among the animal nations. For some time animists have been engaging in relevant conversational and other discursive encounters. Animists may have something to teach ethologists, if not about the questions scientists ask, at least about ways in which humans might converse with animals, hopefully without the spectres of Doolittle and Disney interfering. Many indigenous and other animists have a hard enough time getting ethnographers to learn anything, but I am hopeful that some ethologists may turn out to be a more responsive breed. Rather than barring ethnographers from this conversation between animists and ethologists and the conversation with animals to which it is intended to contribute, I note that some of the most exciting ethnography recently has been about the protocols by which modernity’s academics might engage in dialogue with people of other cultures (see Smith 1999; Harvey 2003b; Rose 2004). In some respects, all I propose is that we make life more exciting and difficult for ourselves by extending this continuing search for protocols, processes, and etiquette by which dialogue is promoted to the encounter between human and other-than-human persons.

I give only a few examples here of animist protocols and processes. To begin with, there are ways of making introductions and maintaining easy, everyday, basic relations. The almost casual gifting of tobacco or sage by many Native Americans, or of beer by many Africans, can simply express respect toward particular other-than-humans or toward a generality or collective of such persons. This may be seen as good etiquette, the polite form of greeting in a particular location or culture, somewhat like handshakes in some cultures or *hongji* (sharing breath while pressing noses together) in others. Even more casually, an animist culture may inculcate

ways of behaving in the woods, for example, that does not suggest that humans are dominant (or have the right to be), while nature is a resource. Some of us who believe in human rights not only support legislation against the use of child labor to make athletic shoes, we also use roads and pavements as if others have as much right to be there as we do. Further ways of acting toward others are based on these basic levels of respectful behavior.

Sometimes a more intense and prolonged encounter or conversation is sought. Someone might seek knowledge from a wiser other-than-human person. In many cultures this may entail fasting and questing for a vision. Perhaps unfortunately, this term stresses visual experience and may suggest false vision or hallucination. What it should suggest is the prolonged sight of a person who otherwise is more elusive or more distant. (Those familiar with Diana Eck's *Daśan*, 1996, may recognize resonances here.) Particular cultures teach particular methods for indicating the desire to be face to face in the presence of particular others. Many of these require careful preparation. Sometimes the extreme stimulation of dramatic personal encounter or presence may be preceded by extreme deprivations of fasting and endurance (hanging in a tree, immobility on a mountain) for some time. If the casual everyday expressions of animism express human participation in the world rather than our dominance in it, these more intense encounters, and especially their preparatory efforts, express the peripheral status of humanity to the lives of many other persons. We might learn from the Ojibwe and other Native Americans to "cry for a vision" in order to demonstrate that we know that we are only a small part of the cosmos and ecosystem. Even in cultures that live largely by taking animal lives it is important for people to forcefully remind themselves often that this is not by right. A certain humility is required of those who wait for bears to spend time teaching wisdom to humans who like eating bear meat.

Animist cultures are quite clear that much of what passes for ordinary human behavior (eating animals, for example) is offensive to those animals. Many cultures have protocols by which a hunter might approach an animal, and there may be lessons here for those who decide that some necessary experiment requires the taking of an animal's life. Many cultures also have systems for trying to resolve the difficulties generated by such practices. If we imagine that factory farming and vivisection are deeply insulting to the wider community of life, perhaps we can learn from these animists. This mode of shamanism (the mediation of a trained expert communicator with other-than-human persons) may be a far more exciting lesson than most of what modernist Westerners claim to have learned from shamans. To give just one example of this contrast, the easy way of adopting shamanism has been to psychologize the whole thing, turning it into an imaginative encounter with inner or archetypal realities. This has its difficulties and its benefits, but it hardly challenges modernity's underlying worldview and is therefore unlikely to solve many of its problems. A

more difficult path would be to consider the contrasting roles of ritual in those animist societies that employ shamans and those modernist societies that inherited an abhorrence of “mere” ritual from the Protestant Christian reformers. Just saying sorry, or expressing the meaning of some rituals without doing them, is not an option for most animist communities. Whether this is because animals refuse to understand the mere words or whether they actually require more elaborate displays remains to be seen.

CONCLUSION

It has been my aim to suggest ways in which a respectful conversation between animals and academics may be pursued either through the mediation of animists or by learning appropriate etiquette and protocol from them. Two somewhat more radical thoughts occur to me in closing: (1) few animists privilege animals over other kinds of persons (rocks, trees, birds, thunderstorms)—it should be possible to learn how to communicate not only with our closest kin (chimps) but also with our more distant relations (such as rocks); and (2) we may need the animals, plants, birds, rocks, and other persons to initiate us into the art of conversation. Many animists have found particular other-than-human persons more than willing to help: mushroom persons play this role in some cases. But animists are also aware that human efforts to communicate may be rejected. Somehow I imagine that expressions of humility, the willingness to wait patiently to see if our “others” are willing to talk now, and the possibility of rejection, may be too much for many of us. Funding agencies may not be impressed with the need to sit and wait before any more active engagement commences. Nonetheless, I am sure that some of what we have been trying to achieve—such as a full understanding of the way the world works—will be open to us only when we start asking politely.

NOTES

This article is based on a paper delivered at the American Academy of Religion, San Antonio, Texas, in November 2004.

1. This is expanded upon in my animism Web site, www.animism.co.uk.

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