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Animism: Respecting the Living World

Graham Harvey, 2005

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Graham Harvey's *Animism* is an extremely useful guide to the complex and changing terrain of its subject-matter. Combining clarity with passion and some depth, it mobilizes insights from a wide range of disciplines: anthropology, sociology, philosophy, religious studies and literary criticism. This is no less than what is required by a term whose original meaning is currently in the midst of a process of radical re-appropriation by its original targets or their heirs. (This has happened before, of course, with 'punk' and 'impressionism'.)

Harvey defines the new meaning as centring on a recognition that "the world of full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others" (xi) – that is, subject-subject (or I-Thou) relationships. He plausibly justifies this usage on the interrelated grounds that (1) it already exists as such; (2) as a corollary, it addresses concerns and debates of some importance; and (3) in so doing, it entails a critical dimension vis-à-vis the project of modernity: "The reclamation of the name animism from colonial discourse is part of the resistance of those celebrating their relationships to living lands." (81) In this connection, it is gratifying to find, in discourse which is primarily (although not only) academic, open recognition of the fact that epistemological issues are ultimately inseparable from (although not identical with) axiological and political ones. "To speak of cows, trees, laboratory mice – including genetically engineered ones – as persons, or even as 'beings', is to invite an alteration of perception *and* action" (196).

We are a long way here from Tylor's animism as a primitive belief in, and mistaken perception of, spirits – and from the covertly imperialistic teleology that informed it. Harvey analyses that concept in its various guises (religious, anthropological, psychological and so on) and traces the process of change, drawing on a wide range of creative contemporary thinkers, especially (but by no means only) anthropologists: Irving Hallowell, Nurit Bird-David and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, but also ecological philosopher Erazim Kohak, ecofeminist Val Plumwood, eco-phenomenologist David Abram and many others.

The following section instances Ojibwe, Maori, Aboriginal and ecopagan 'case studies' in more detail. Harvey then bravely plunges into 'Animist Issues' such as personhood, spirits, cannibalism, totemism, and ethics. One such section, on shamanism, not only functions as an admirably clear delineation in miniature of that baggy monster but uncompromisingly – and rightly – identifies the primacy of animism: "shamans live and work for animists not shamanists. Their religions are animisms not shamanisms" (139). And the final section considers perennially difficult areas of thought where the 'new animism' has something to offer: environmentalism, consciousness and selfhood.

There are also tantalizing overlaps with still more subjects, such as the phenomenology of landscape and place, and the way is enlivened with insights which extend well beyond purely academic import. Harvey points out, for example, that "Personhood is a goal not a given – people are constructed by experience, effort,

engagement and education. Most important, personhood is necessarily embodied and relational, and both of these require and receive responses from other people who grow us up.” (175) By the same token – and this is a point too often overlooked – “the Western categories (and their dichotomisation), ‘object’ and ‘subject’, ‘thing’ and ‘person’ are not naturally self-evident but, rather, locally and experientially determined by those inculcated to see ‘properly’” (151).

Of course, in taking on such a rich and diverse but also, in crucial respects, new subject, Harvey’s account unavoidably raises some questions which it does not fully or convincingly answer. I do not therefore regard the following problematics as in any way debilitating to that account but rather, if anything, as testimony to its fruitfulness, and invitations to further conversations.

One point is simply this: more evidence would have been appreciated of an awareness that even in openly animistic societies, people have still managed to find ways to do some pretty horrible things to each other. While I don’t think Harvey himself indulges in fantasies of a Golden Age (or Place) of harmony, he doesn’t do quite enough to discourage them in his readers.

Another question is metaphysical, namely, are disembodied spirits possible in an animistic world? It would take a bold soul to rule out the possibility altogether, but Harvey’s position seems ambiguous; on the one hand, “only some people are embodied” (120), but he also maintains that the consciousness indicated by intentional acts – a *sine qua non* of personhood - “is necessarily embodied” (192).

A more urgent consideration is this. Harvey argues, with good reason, that the primary obstacle to animism “is the West’s inability to deal with the aliveness of what it insists are ‘objects’” (80), and that “the greatest challenge to Western worldviews” is “the aliveness of all who live as, as well as in, particular lands or places” (19). Yet his discussion could be taken to imply that the Platonic-Christian-Cartesian yoke – or its modernist heir, Weber’s ‘iron shell’ – can be thrown off relatively lightly, perhaps with sufficient good will, intelligence and persistence. This I doubt, even if all three are present. Even if our lived and daily life (as David Abram has pointed out) is animist in practice, the moment we come to think about, discuss or theorize it as such, individual and collective mental habits with quite other import spring into play. And even if these can be mastered, passing between the very different intellectual worlds of, say, modernism and animism itself requires a kind of intellectual shamanism (loosely speaking) which is no mean feat.

Fourth, there is a knotty methodological problem which is left unresolved. Harvey firmly asserts that “An animist philosophy is also phenomenological” (197) but he also wants phenomenology to be corrected by “carefully considered, practised and educated knowledges” (198). But how is this to be done? Within the academy, which one might assume to be particularly self-aware about such things, there remains a striking gulf between phenomenologists on the one hand and social and cultural constructionists on the other. It is mainly characterized, on both sides, by ill-informed assumptions and a disinclination to engage in dialogue. I don’t say an intelligent median way isn’t possible, but Harvey has left its outlines to others. These observations are less important, however, than the excellent book he *has* written.