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From the Closet of the Mind to Mindedness: Rethinking Animism at the Crossover of Science Studies, Postcolonial Ethnography and Environmental Humanities

Fani Cettl

Recently the concept of animism has been radically rethought at the crossover of postcolonial ethnography, environmental humanities and science studies. This reconceptualisation aims at decolonising western sciences, destabilising an anthropocentric world picture and articulating an environmental and animal ethics in the current context of human-induced climate change and practices such as factory farming. It decisively abandons the controversial colonial epistemology in which animism was first introduced as a primitive and regressive belief in the supernatural spirits. In this essay I would like to situate this current cross-disciplinary rethinking of animism into a genealogy of historical discourses, following scholarship that has theorised one aspect of Enlightenment secularisation processes as the internalisation of spirits and ghosts from non-human materiality on the outside into the space of the human mind. Building on this approach, I propose that the current, post-Enlightenment, posthumanist, cross-disciplinary rethinking of animism can be said to mark a certain historical reversal: an externalisation of what has been seen as within and of the human mind, which I will in this essay term ‘mindedness’, to the outside non-human materiality (again). I do not attempt to give a precise, rigorous definition of ‘mindedness’ for my purposes here, beyond a vague, dictionary description of ‘the state or quality of being minded’.¹ This working description will allow me to discuss different aspects or degrees of this quality or state across the boundaries of living and non-living beings, to address what in scholarship has been conceptualised as the agency of material entities, as well as in terms of the consciousness and intentionality of non-human living beings. This discussion will challenge the historical association of the mind exclusively with humans, ever since early modern mechanistic philosophies and life sciences. Today, what is understood to be the mind increasingly spills in different ways over the boundaries of human bodies to various non-humans.

Let us start with the conventional, disciplinary understanding of animism, which originates from early nineteenth century anthropological theory. Edward Burnett Tylor in *Primitive Culture* (1871) defined it as a ‘belief in personal souls animating even what we call inanimate bodies’, characteristic of the lower, primitive stage of human evolutionary development.² Tylor presumed that western secular and scientific societies had left such superstitions behind, and he considered Victorian spiritualist séances to be a regressive remnant of animist primitivism. In turn, he associated it with non-western, racially marked and colonised peoples when he speculated that a ‘wild North American Indian looking on a spirit-séance in

¹ Collins English Dictionary, (2017), <<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/mindedness>> [accessed 18 July 2017].

² Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom*, Vol. 1 (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1874 [1871]), p. 287.

London [...] would be perfectly at home in the proceedings'.³ If we read this tableau from Bruno Latour's perspective, we can argue that Tylor enacted discursively what Latour terms the 'Great Divides', i.e., the modern binaries between scientific rationality and superstitious belief, modern self and other, subject and object, centre and colony, but crucially also between humans and non-humans. Latour's 'Modern Constitution', which Tylor implemented in his definition of animism, entails casting human beings as the only political agents who autonomously and intentionally act on and transform their surroundings, while relegating non-human forces to an 'inanimate' status, in the sense that they no longer interfere in human affairs and therefore do not exert political agency in the world.⁴ Rather, various non-humans, be it animals, plants or objects, ever since the seventeenth century increasingly started to be understood primarily as passive, non-intentional, scientific objects or economic resources, while God has strangely been crossed out but not completely erased, according to Latour.⁵ The dominant model of early modern science was the mechanistic model, which conceptualised all living beings as elaborate mechanisms that could be explained through the physical laws of motion. As John Henry argues, the living functions of nutrition, reproduction, perception and self-motion, which had previously been explained in terms of vegetative and animal souls, became understood as complex automata based on hydraulic systems.⁶ Within this mechanistic model, Descartes advocated that only human beings possess minds, unlike animals. Based on this idea, he was a proponent of animal vivisection for experimental purposes.⁷

Interestingly enough, throughout the Enlightenment, expelling 'souls' or 'spirits' from non-human living beings also correlated with peopling the human mind with all kinds of strange agencies, previously thought to be on the outside. According to Terry Castle's compelling argument, what occurred is 'the historic Enlightenment internalisation of the spectral – the gradual reinterpretation of ghosts and apparitions as *hallucinations*, or projections of the mind [...] [t]he mind became a "world of phantoms" and thinking itself an act of ghost-seeing'.⁸ As Castle further argues, this culminated in the nineteenth century post-Darwinian conceptualisations of the psyche, with 'Freud's barely metaphoric conception of ghosts lurking in the unconscious',⁹ posited now through the new psychoanalytical register in terms of involuntary drives and instincts. More recently, Robert Miles follows the same line of argumentation when he intriguingly shows how, in British Romantic poetry, the trope of the ghostly 'inner stranger' that

³ Edward B. Taylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, Vol. 1, 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1873), quoted in Shane McCroristine, *Spectres of the Self: Thinking about Ghosts and Ghost-Seeing in England, 1750-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.84.

⁴ Bruno Latour, 'An Attempt at a "Compositionist Manifesto"', *New Literary History*, 41.3., (2010), 471-490 (p. 481).

⁵ See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁶ John Henry, *The Scientific Revolution and the Origins of Modern Science* (New York: Palgrave, 1997), pp. 80-81.

⁷ Colin Allen and Michael Trestman, 'Animal Consciousness', in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 24 October 2016 <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consciousness-animal/>> [accessed 18 July 2017].

⁸ Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and The Invention of the Uncanny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 17.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

ambiguously straddles the outside/inside border of the poetic persona can, crucially, be seen to prefigure Freud's theory of the unconscious.¹⁰

Freud clearly embraced Tylor's colonially-inflected evolutionary epistemology. In his essay on 'The Uncanny' (1919), he wrote of:

[T]he old *animistic* view of the universe, a view characterised by the idea that the world was peopled with human spirits, by the narcissistic overrating of one's own mental processes, by the omnipotence of thoughts and the technique of magic that relied on it, by the attribution of carefully graded magical powers (*mana*) to alien persons and things

which all went against 'the unmistakable sanctions of reality'.¹¹ For Freud, 'spirit' is essentially a human characteristic, and attributing it – as in animist cosmology – to non-human animals, plants and even non-living objects, is a narcissistic, anthropomorphic projection to the outside of what is actually one's own mental process, and could be understood as consciousness and intentionality. Attributing these 'powers', which are exclusive properties of the human mind, to non-humans is a flawed projection for Freud, but I wish to suggest here that we can read this the other way around – Freud could be seen as folding the spirits which animate animals, plants and objects into the human mind and positing them as agencies in the unconscious layer. That is, the unconscious crucially becomes understood as driven by the biological, mechanistic instincts of Eros and Thanatos – namely the sex and death drives – which are closely associated with animal and vegetal living functions, and with a striving towards an inorganic state, in contrast to the layer of functions that is specifically human and rational.

Freud internalises animal, vegetal and inorganic agencies to delineate different functions of life within the human. Giorgio Agamben has argued that these distinctions contribute to the biopolitical production of the human: 'the division of life into vegetal and relational, organic and animal, animal and human, therefore passes first of all as a mobile border within living man'.¹² The unconscious acts as such a mobile membrane between human, animal, vegetal, and inorganic functions within the human. Interpreting its manifestations as agencies of the biological sex and death drives, and not as spirits and ghosts (and therefore the realm of the natural and decidedly not the supernatural) comes to define a new science of the psyche – psychoanalysis. In this way, as Cornelius Borck suggests, what can be understood as a 'ban on animism' was intricately intertwined with the emergence of the concept of the psyche, as the properties of consciousness and intentionality were foregrounded as specific to the human, and agencies of the non-human were subsumed into the human unconscious.¹³ In my

¹⁰ Robert Miles, 'Romanticism, Enlightenment, and Mediation: The Case of the Inner Stranger', in *This is Enlightenment*, ed. by Clifford Siskin and William Warner (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 173-188 (p. 182). For further insight into the historical processes of internalisation of ghosts into human consciousness in the Enlightenment project, see Shane McCorristine, *Spectres of the Self: Thinking about Ghosts and Ghost-Seeing in England, 1750-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Uncanny*, trans. by David McLintock (Penguin: London, 2003 [1919]), pp. 123-162 (p. 147).

¹² Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. by Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 15.

¹³ Cornelius Borck, 'Animism in the Sciences Then and Now', *E-flux Journal*, 36, (2012), 1-8 (p. 4).

reading, Freud manages to maintain a careful balancing act to preserve the human political agency and ontological primacy by subsuming the spirits and souls that animate non-humans into the closet of the human mind and collapsing them with biological instincts. In this way, he moves them from the political realm of intentional interference in human affairs into the sphere of scientific objects to be analysed and controlled. That is, while the involuntary agency of biological instincts is destabilising, which is the key premise of Freud's approach, it is still malleable enough to be kept under wilful conscious control through cultural sublimation.

Following this line of historical argumentation, I suggest that in the current moment of post-Enlightenment, postcolonial and posthumanist discourses, the reconceptualisations of animism mark a historical reversal: i.e., from what was inside (as a hallucination) and of (inherent to) the human mind towards externalising mindedness onto non-human materiality (again). In the Anthropocene age, this reversal has the historically specific aim of fostering an environmental and animal ethics by foregrounding nonhuman agencies. Non-human materiality, both the living and the non-living, is increasingly being understood as exerting agency and influencing humans in various ways: as actants in human/non-human actor networks; in political ecology, to use Latour's vocabulary; or as assemblages of the biological and the social, to draw on Deleuze and Guattari.¹⁴ As Latour argues about a world view of human/non-human political ecology, 'call it "animism" if you wish, but it will no longer be enough to brand it with the mark of infamy'.¹⁵ His approach does not privilege living organisms over non-living materiality, but, in an effort to rethink animism in view of ethical relations towards other living species on the planet, much scholarship does. I wish to suggest that one important aspect of this discussion is to understand animals and plants - as well as environmental systems, which include non-living objects - as minded in different ways and to different degrees, be it in terms of exerting purposeful agency, or, more particularly, manifesting consciousness and intentionality. In addition to the critical cutting across environmentalist perspectives and current scientific research into animals and plants (which is often brought to the foreground, as we will see below), scholars also take a postcolonial approach to indigenous world views. The potential of rethinking animism, as Borck puts it effectively, 'does not so much depend on the question of how to regain perspectives that have been discarded, but more on the problem of finding a perspective outside a separation of worldviews'.¹⁶ That is, its potential lies in deconstructing the hierarchical binaries between modern western sciences and traditional, pre-modern knowledge.

One early intervention into the reconceptualisation of animism through an affirmation of a non-human agent, which has gone mostly unnoticed by subsequent scholarship, can be found in Donna Haraway's classic essay 'Situated Knowledges' (1991), in which she calls for an alliance between western sciences and Native American mythology:

¹⁴ See Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005 [1980]).

¹⁵ Latour, 'An Attempt at a "Compositionist Manifesto"', (p. 484).

¹⁶ Borck, 'Animism in the Sciences Then and Now', (p. 3).

[T]he Coyote or Trickster, embodied in American Southwest Indian accounts, suggests our situation when we give up mastery but keep searching for fidelity, knowing all the while we will be hoodwinked. I think these are useful myths for scientists who might be our allies.¹⁷

Proposing that western sciences should not be exclusionary of indigenous myth, but in fact can learn from it, Haraway depicts the coyote as ‘hoodwinking’ the scientists, not allowing them to ever ‘master’ nature in a totalising manner. In my reading, she figures the coyote as an unpredictable, intentional agent that interferes with humans all the time and not as a passive object, reduced through scientific discourses to the mechanical reactions to stimuli. This early reference to animism can be said to anticipate Haraway’s more recent work on companion species ethics, where she explores explicitly how to rethink ethics towards non-human animals, if they are figured both scientifically and philosophically as active, flourishing agents in their own right.¹⁸

The compatibility between western philosophical tradition and the indigenous world views of Aboriginal Australians has been explored by Val Plumwood, with the aim of articulating an environmental ethics.¹⁹ Deborah Bird delineates Plumwood’s stance as one of ‘philosophical animism’, which, rather than trying to appropriate a traditional world view, calls for an environmental ethics between all living beings that could be argued from within western philosophy.²⁰ Crucially, Plumwood’s philosophical animism challenges the western ‘mind/matter dualism which allocates all mind to humans, and leaves all the rest of the living and non-living world in a state of mindless matter’.²¹ As Bird Rose further highlights, the Australian Aboriginal world view that sentience and mindedness permeate living and non-living materiality has increasingly become the focus of cutting-edge scientific research. Marc Bekoff is the most prominent of a group of scientists whose work provides evidence that what can be understood as intentionality, usually associated with higher neural processes, exists across many non-human life forms, including plants.²²

Recent ethnographic research in the Amazon region similarly bridges scientific and indigenous perspectives. Jeremy Narby, who publishes in popular rather than academic media, but is interesting for my argument here, did research with the Ashaninca people as well as biologists and ethologists, based on which he argues somewhat provocatively that nature is ‘intelligent’, if intelligence is reconfigured as not an exceptionally human prerogative.²³ Thus, scientists are currently observing that both plants and animals exhibit behaviours that can be seen as intentional rather than instinctive, or, better yet, as

¹⁷ Donna J. Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’, in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 183-201 (p.199).

¹⁸ Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

¹⁹ Among other titles, in Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002).

²⁰ Deborah Bird Rose, ‘Val Plumwood’s Philosophical Animism: attentive interactions in the sentient world’, *Environmental Humanities*, 3 (2013), 93-109 (p. 93).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

²³ Jeremy Narby, *Intelligence in Nature: an Inquiry into Knowledge* (New York: Tarcher, 2005).

blurring the boundary between the two, an example being the behaviour of crows that use complicated tools. For Narby, this is highly compatible with the Ashaninca world view in which all living beings are considered ‘human’, in the sense of purposeful agents. Narby states that scientists are only now catching up with what in animist cosmologies has long been conceptualised, after centuries of the predominance of mechanistic theories in the life sciences, which have supported the controversial practice of animal vivisection.²⁴ Eduardo Kohn’s more academically rigorous anthropological exploration of the Amazon suggests that the Amazon forest is a complex ‘ecology of selves’, where animals and forest spirits are meaning-making entities and therefore ‘persons’ or ‘selves’ with their specific points of view.²⁵ He proposes that having a point of view is not limited to representation in human language but refers to semiosis as a general phenomenon of life itself: ‘All life is semiotic and all semiosis is alive. In important ways, then, life and thought are one and the same: life thinks; thoughts are alive.’²⁶ Kohn articulates a biosemiotic approach to the Amazon cosmology, in that he associates life and all living beings with thinking itself. However, he is also careful to say that such an approach does not offer a straightforward recipe for environmental and animal ethics, because living beings as selves in the Amazon forest can also easily be objectified and turned into prey.

Wendy Wheeler also takes a biosemiotic approach to animism, which, unlike Kohn’s, includes what we consider non-living materiality. Following semiotician Gregory Bateson, she proposes a biocybersemiotic understanding of relationships between humans and non-humans, and also of mind itself:

Mind, it seems, belongs to looping and recursive semiotic flows between chemical and central nervous systems, bodies and natural and socio-cultural environments. We can no longer think of mind as either solely human, or as reducible to brains in bodies alone.²⁷

In such a systemic understanding of how both living and non-living entities come together to produce what is understood as mind, Wheeler substantially reconfigures animism as an experience of the sacred and not a devalued belief, as a ‘creative knowing-in-nonknowing’ in any biocybersemiotic system of knowledge, where knowledge can never be completely totalised or mastered.²⁸ Intriguingly, she proposes that the experience of the creative knowing-in-nonknowing is what brings humans closer to ‘the animal mind in the human’, from which human minds evolved, and back into ‘humananimal [sic] world, into

²⁴ To quote historian of science John Henry on the persistence of mechanistic approaches in the life sciences: ‘Although vitalistic ideas have had their moments in the subsequent history of the life sciences, they have mostly been seen as capitulations to a fundamentally “unscientific” view, and as such have tended to be reduced, sooner or later, to a more “mechanist” account. It remains true to say that our own world view is heavily influenced by the mechanistic notion of the *bête-machine*, with all its implications for biology and medicine’. In *The Scientific Revolution and the Origins of Modern Science* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1997), p. 84.

²⁵ Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), p. 16.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Wendy Wheeler, ‘Gregory Bateson and Biosemiotics: Transcendence and Animism in the 21st century’, *Green Letters*, 13.1 (2010), 35-54 (p. 43).

²⁸ Ibid., p. 47.

captivated enchanted musement’, before returning to rationality and logic.²⁹ Wheeler thus reconfigures animism by revaluing animal modes of knowing, in contrast to the rational and logical, scientific pursuit of knowledge.

Her notion of animism as a ‘captivated enchanted musement’, as well as the systemic conceptualisation of mind, resonates with Jane Bennett’s models of enchantment and vibrant matter. Bennett argues for a ‘quasi-pagan model of enchantment’, to articulate that non-humans exert agency, have the capacity to affect or, indeed, enchant humans in various ways (an idea which, in her later work, she develops into the notion of vibrant matter).³⁰ By ‘vibrant matter’, or the ‘political ecology of things’, Bennett proposes that all non-human entities are agential and vital in the human to non-human Latourian political ecologies or Deleuzian assemblages, rather than inanimate, inert or passive.³¹ While for the scholars above the reconceptualisations of animism via the discussion of non-human agencies — more specifically consciousness, intentionality and even intelligence — primarily opens the question of ethics towards non-human animals and plants, Bennett pushes even further by rethinking ethics towards both the living and non-living things that affect us. As she puts it: ‘The feeling of an incomplete, dangerous, and unsettling affinity with the non-human outside may just induce me to treat it – animals, plants, earth, even artifacts and commodities – less mindlessly, with more care, wariness, or respect’.³² This proposition in view of mindedness brings to the fore the question of how non-living things as agents might also be figured as minded. I particularly have in mind the everyday digital media with which we are surrounded, our laptops and smartphones, but beyond that, also artificial intelligence. Even the name ‘smartphone’ speaks of the association of mindedness with these gadgets. What of ‘the animism of the contemporary technoscientific practices’ then, that Borck refers to, which code and perform non-human agencies and certainly do not fail to enchant humans?³³ Beyond the animist ethical considerations of all living beings, it is worth exploring further what possible ethical questions such technoscientific animism might raise about the human relationship to digital media and artificial intelligence, but such an enquiry lies outside of the scope of this essay.

In this piece, I aimed to show how the outlined reconfigurations of animism via mindedness aim for a robust ethical consideration of animals, plants and the wider environment by humans, which is urgently needed in the current contexts of climate change and factory farming. Importantly, these reconfigurations provincialise western sciences, reinterpret indigenous world views, and grant political agency to non-humans. As we are emerging on the other side of the humanist Enlightenment episteme, animist spirits, previously subsumed into the closet of the human mind in an anthropocentric world view,

²⁹ Ibid., p. 46.

³⁰ Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 12.

³¹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

³² Jane Bennett, ‘Thing Power and an Ecological Sublime’, in *The Sublime Now*, ed. by Luke White and Claire Pajackowska (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp. 23-34 (p. 32).

³³ Borck, ‘Animism in the Sciences Then and Now’, (p. 5).

are now being 'let outside' in the form of mindedness – in fact, as I have argued throughout, in its many forms of agency, consciousness, and intentionality, mindedness is being extended to living beings and their networks with the non-living.

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