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Van Eyghen, Hans

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## An Epistemic Defense of Animism

Hans Van Eyghen

Animism is a topic rarely discussed in contemporary philosophy of religion.<sup>1</sup> Most academic discussion on animism takes place in disciplines like anthropology or religious studies and is descriptive in nature. Sometimes anthropologists do argue for the value of animistic practices. For example, Graham Harvey notes that animism implies a greater respect for nature which makes animism more suited to tackle environmental challenges than western materialism (Harvey, 2005). Such arguments are moral in nature rather than epistemic.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary philosophy of religion, by contrast, is unapologetically epistemic. Some philosophers provide new defenses of traditional arguments for the

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<sup>1</sup> A notable exception is Tiddy Smith's recent defense of the existence of nature spirits (Smith, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> I discuss a moral-epistemic argument in Sect. 11.

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H. Van Eyghen (✉)

Department of Systematic Theology and Philosophy, Tilburg University,  
Tilburg, The Netherlands

existence of God<sup>3</sup> or defend new ones.<sup>4</sup> Others argue for the rationality of religious belief on other grounds. Epistemic discussions on religious belief are almost always limited to belief in God. Usually, philosophers of religion employ a concept of God in line with traditional Christianity.<sup>5</sup> Although traditional Christianity includes belief in the existence of various other supernatural beings (most notably angels and demons), their existence is rarely discussed.

Contemporary philosophy of religion is also thoroughly western. Most contemporary philosophers of religion have a Christian background. Philosophers who argue against the existence of God also mainly raise arguments against abrahamic concepts of God. A clear indication is the fact that most widely discussed argument against the existence of God is still the problem of evil. The argument roughly states that the widespread occurrence of evil fits poorly with the existence of an all-good, all-powerful God. The argument is thus only forceful if God is indeed regarded as all-good and all-powerful. While God is regarded as such in most strands of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, it is not at all clear that this is the case in Indian, Chinese, Japanese or African indigenous religions.

Below, I provide an assessment of the epistemic status of animistic beliefs. My approach is inspired by two currents in contemporary epistemology. The first are defenses of the reliability of (religious) experiences. A considerable number of contemporary philosophers (of religion) argue that experiences can be trusted as long as there is no counterevidence. I will apply this to experiences of animism. The second are debunking arguments that draw on scientific discoveries. Debunking arguments point to scientific explanations for how a belief is formed to argue that the belief can no longer be regarded as rational. The best-known debunking arguments were raised against morality and religious belief.<sup>6</sup> I will

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<sup>3</sup> For a recent over view, see (Craig & Moreland, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, (Rutten, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Often philosophers of religion argue for (or against) a perfect being (a being that is all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing etc.). This concept of God also fits well with the traditional Christian concept of God.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, (Street, 2006; Wilkins & Griffiths, 2013).

investigate whether a similar debunking argument can be raised against animistic beliefs.

## 1 Defining Animism

Before we assess the epistemic status of animistic beliefs, we need to make clear what we mean by them. Animism is common in African indigenous, American indigenous, Indian, Chinese, Japanese and Polynesian religions. For example, traditional Japanese Shinto worship involves showing respect to various spirits of rivers and forest. Ancient Celtic, Germanic, Roman and Greek religions also show clear marks of animistic beliefs (cf. Lucas, 2017). The scope of animistic beliefs is thus large and arguments in favor or against their rationality potentially have a lot of ramifications.

Contemporary anthropologists who study animism often make a distinction between ‘old animism’ and ‘new animism’, with most siding with the new animism camp. Below, I discuss how both construe animism.

## 2 Old Animism

The term ‘animism’ is usually traced back to Edward Tylor. Tylor regarded animism as a “doctrine of souls” or “doctrine of spirits”. The distinctive feature of animism is the belief that spiritual beings are common (Tylor, 1871). Tylor regarded animism as an early, undeveloped form of religiosity. For Tylor, animism was the religion of primitive people devoid of culture and devoid of explicit religious conceptions whatsoever (Park, n.d.).

Tylor’s account offers a good starting point. However, to gain more clarity on what animists believe we need a more elaborate account of what spirits are. As I argued elsewhere, spirits are generally regarded as humanlike invisible beings. Some believe that spirits are deceased people who continue to roam the earth. Others believe that spirits are divine beings (Van Eyghen, 2018). Although belief in spirits is central to animism, it does not quite capture the distinctiveness of animism.

Nineteenth-century Spiritism<sup>7</sup> and traditions that sprung from it (e.g. Brazilian Espiritismo) affirm the existence of spirits but they are not commonly called animistic. Furthermore, belief in demons is common in Christianity and a majority of Muslims affirms the existence of Jinn. Both demons and Jinn can be classified as spirits. What distinguishes animism from spirit-belief in these traditions is the belief that spirits inhabit objects, plants and non-human animals.<sup>8</sup> For example, ancient Celts believe that some sacred trees are inhabited by spirits. Adherents of Japanese Shinto believe in the existence of *kami* that govern rivers and streams.<sup>9</sup> Siberian shamans believe that animals have spirits that can be approached by imitating animal sounds (cf. Willerslev, 2007). Contrary to other religious traditions like Spiritism, adherents of animism tend not to regard spirits as *disembodied*.<sup>10</sup> In Christianity, Islam or Spiritism, spirits are commonly regarded as existing without a physical body or carrier. Animists, by contrast, tend to believe that spirits inhabit a physical carrier (i.e. an animal body, plant or object) much like human souls inhabit a human body on dualistic accounts of humans.<sup>11</sup> As Rane Willerslev notes, animists do not always believe that *all objects* or *all animals* have spirits (Willerslev, 2007). Some (or even most) objects, plants or animals are regarded as devoid of spirits as most westerners do.

Having a spirit can mean a lot of things. Most adherents of animism likely do not have an elaborate metaphysical account of what it means to have a spirit or soul.<sup>12</sup> The approach of animists is much more pragmatic. Regarding objects or animals as spirited means that objects or animals are approached in a similar or analogous way as humans. In doing so,

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<sup>7</sup>This form of Spiritism gained popularity near the end of the nineteenth century. Adherents held séances in which they invoked spirits or tried to communicate to spirits through material means (e.g. Ouija boards). Notable figures in the spiritist movement were Allan Kardec, Frans Mesmer and the Leah sisters.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. (Hornborg, 2006; Stanford & Jong, 2019).

<sup>9</sup>The *kami* that govern rivers and stream are called ‘Kawanokami’ or ‘Kahaku’ (Nakayama, 2005).

<sup>10</sup>A considerable number of animists do hold that a spirit can be disentangled from its body. Nonetheless they are usually embodied.

<sup>11</sup>Regarding animals or objects as *spirited* can be regarded as analogous to Platonist accounts where souls are the essence of persons and are separable from bodies. They can also be regarded as analogous to Aristotelian accounts where body and soul jointly make out personhood and are not separable.

<sup>12</sup>For a recent account of what it means to have a soul, see (Swinburne, 2019).

animists (tacitly) accept that spirited objects or animals have similar capacities like humans. What are those capacities? These are some of the capacities that are attributed:

1. ability to communicate;
2. ability to reflect;
3. ability for intentional action.

Some biologists and philosophers argue that abilities 1–3 can be attributed to some animal species. Especially species that are more cognitively advanced would be able to communicate with other members of their species, be capable of rudimentary reflection and be able to act intentionally. Such abilities have been attributed to chimpanzees (De Waal & Tyack, 2003), dolphins (Tomonaga & Uwano, 2010) and corvids (Emery & Clayton, 2004). Biologists add that animals have these abilities to a (far) more limited extent than humans do. Reflection by chimpanzees is limited to practical problems like how to gather food or how to organize against threats.<sup>13</sup> The abilities attributed by animists go beyond such rudimentary abilities. Adherents of animism tend to regard spirited objects or animals as having similar or even greater capacities than humans have.

Construing ‘being spirited’ as having a number of abilities misses out on one central aspect of animism. Having a spirit also means that objects or animals have a spiritual essence. In some cases, that essence is divine and immortal. In this sense, being spirited again bears large similarities to being ‘ensouled’ for humans.

### 3 New Animism

The idea that animism consists of a set of beliefs about spirited objects and/or animals has been subject to growing criticism in recent years. Defenders of ‘New Animism’ argue that animism should be construed

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<sup>13</sup> Aristotle had a similar view. He argues that animals have a soul that allows them to engage in a number of activities (most notably self-directed motion). Contrary to humans they do not have a rational soul and thus miss out on most distinctively human capacities.

differently, with an emphasis on animistic practices rather than (primitive, misguided) animistic beliefs.<sup>14</sup>

Nurit Bird-David objects to traditional analyses of animism where animism is regarded as a ‘proto-religion’ or a ‘failed epistemology’. Such analyses trace back to Edward Tylor’s original account of animism (see Sect. 2) and betray a commitment to positivism and Cartesian dualism.<sup>15</sup> As an alternative to rationalist approaches, Bird-David proposes to regard animism as a ‘relational epistemology’. Animism is not a well-articulated worldview or religious system but rather a way of life. Animists live in a way that is very closely related with the natural world. They interact with their natural environment in a way similar to how they interact with fellow humans. For example, Bird-David observed how members of the Nayaka (a group of tribal people living in South India) talk and listen to stones or other objects (Bird-David, 1999). The attitudes and practices of animists toward objects and animals can be compared to how most people act toward fellow humans. Most people who are not psychologically trained do not have a clear set of beliefs about minds or cognitive capabilities of fellow humans. Instead, they learn how to interact with other humans from a young age and most never ask questions on what these interactions imply or how they are made possible.

Animistic practices stem from a different concept of personhood according to Bird-David. Whereas westerners (tacitly) accept a strict dichotomy between human persons and non-human non-persons, animists tend to consider humans and animals as subcategories of a broader category of persons. Because of their broader concept, animists experience the world in a different way and interact with animals like they interact with humans (Bird-David, 1999).

Bird-David notes one aspect of animistic practice among the Nayaka that sets it apart from interactions with fellow humans. On some

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<sup>14</sup>New animism has been defended by a number of authors (see Hallowell, 2010; Harvey, 2014). Viveiros de Castro defends a similar position he calls “perspectivist cosmology” (De Castro, 1998). In this section, I focus on Nurit Bird-David’s defense.

<sup>15</sup>Bird-David even suggests that Tylor was inspired by modernist spiritualism (see above) and their beliefs on spirits. He notes that Tylor took his notion of animism from seventeenth-century alchemist Stahl.

occasions, animistic practice is evoked in special performances. In ritual<sup>16</sup> settings, members of the Nayaka enter into trance and invoke various animals. Members try to imitate animal behavior as well as they can and others make offerings to them. According to Bird-David, such performances bring to life various animal spirits<sup>17</sup> to the Nayaka. During the performances, interactions between humans and animal spirits are highly personal and intense (Bird-David, 1999).

Bird-David puts her new animism in sharp contrast to the old animism as exemplified by Tylor. She writes: “We do not first personify other entities and then socialize with them but personify them as, when, and because we socialize with them” (Bird-David, 1999: 78). The quote suggests that Bird-David’s new animism might not be as new as she claims it is. Old animism need not be construed as a belief-system that comes before any actions that embody animistic beliefs. Bird-David mainly gives an account of how animistic beliefs emerge and how they function within a community. She makes a plausible case that animists gradually develop animistic beliefs through partaking in animistic practices. Very likely, they learn how to engage in these practices by socialization and imitating elders. This account is compatible with my reading of Tylor’s account of animism above.

Bird-David could, however, be making a stronger claim. She might argue that a lot of animists *never* form clear animistic beliefs. Most might leave it at practices and never end up with a full-blown belief-system that goes along with them. New animism thus construed raises a challenge for our purposes. Later on in this chapter, I will evaluate whether animistic beliefs are undermined by recent psychology. If animism consists merely of a practice without beliefs, such an assessment becomes difficult. I argue, however, that Bird-David has not shown that animism consists merely of a practice. It appears as if animists have tacit animistic beliefs that guide their practice. Without these beliefs, animistic practices are not intelligible.

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<sup>16</sup>Bird-David objects to calling the performances rituals, but calls them “practices” instead (Bird-David, 1999).

<sup>17</sup>Bird-David uses the Nayaka term ‘Devaru’ to designate spirits.



A comparison to inter-personal practices is again helpful. I noted above that animistic interaction without clear beliefs can be compared to how most people interact with fellow humans. To be able to interact with others, one need not have clear beliefs about minds or cognitive abilities. When people talk with another, they assume that the other can hear them and can respond. They also assume that the other is similar in at least some respects. These assumptions distinguish interaction with humans from (playful) interaction with computers or cars. While a lot of people will on occasion talk or shout to their computers or cars, they do not assume that they will talk back or understand what they were saying. Most people know that there is a clear difference between such pretend interactions and the real thing. Grasping the difference would be impossible without tacit assumptions about similarity between humans and others.

In a similar way, animistic practices are incomprehensible without some underlying assumptions. It is possible that animists do not regard objects and animals as similar to humans and engage objects and animals as such in an ironic fashion. The fact that animistic rituals and practices are central to animists' lives renders this unlikely. A tacitly held belief that (some) objects and animals are similar to humans explains animistic behavior better. The similarity probably lies in the three abilities I discussed earlier.

In the next section, I argue that tacitly held beliefs can be assessed epistemically even if they are never articulated. Tacit animistic beliefs can be based on misguided intuitions or not be properly supported by evidence and therefore epistemically tainted. In later sections, I look at some of these challenges. If successful, these challenges could show that animistic beliefs are not rationally held whether they are tacitly held or articulated.

## 4 The Rationality of Tacitly Held Beliefs

Contemporary cognitive science and psychology have largely moved away from the idea that all beliefs are consciously available to the subject who holds them. People sometimes act as if they hold certain beliefs

about the world without explicitly avowing them or without being aware of them. Clear examples are people suffering from obsessive compulsion disorder. Patients obsessively perform actions like washing their hands or checking if the door is locked. When prompted to explain why they do so, patients usually admit that their actions do not make sense. Some argue that obsessive actions of this kind trace back to stressful events in the past or past infections.<sup>18</sup> A tacitly held belief (stemming from past experiences) that one ought to be careful to prevent new infections or that one ought to prevent danger can explain the compulsive behavior.

There is also evidence for other behavior that is best explained by tacitly held beliefs. Ohman and Soares argue that an evolved fear module can explain why certain stimuli (e.g. of snakes and spiders) can elicit strong behavioral responses even if subjects do not consciously affirm fear (Ohman, 2009; Öhman & Soares, 1994). An unarticulated (evolved) belief that snakes and spiders are dangerous can explain this behavior well.

Unarticulated, tacit beliefs go by various names. Some authors refer to them as ‘dispositional beliefs’, stressing the idea that subjects are disposed to form beliefs when prompted to do so. Pat Manfredi gives the following example:

Lauren sat at her desk reading her morning mail. Suddenly, she gasped. Her most important clients were coming for dinner that night. She grabbed the phone and dialed her home number. “Bob, I’m so glad I caught you before you left. I forgot to put in the roast. Set the oven timer for 4:00 p.m. Thanks. Goodbye.” (Manfredi, 1993: 95)

Other authors regard tacit beliefs as dispositions to believe as well (e.g. Lycan, 1986).<sup>19</sup> Tacit animistic beliefs are not dispositional like the states in the example. If adherents of new animism are right, people are not easily triggered to state or affirm animistic beliefs when prompted to do

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<sup>18</sup> See (American Psychiatric Association & American Psychiatric Association. Task Force on DSM-IV, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> Lycan also suggests defining tacit beliefs as beliefs without representation (Lycan, 1986). This definition presupposes a representationalist view on belief (cf. Schwitzgebel, 2006). Delving into the discussion between representationalists and other accounts of belief stretches beyond the scope of this chapter. For this reason, I will not pursue Lycan’s suggestion any further.

so. Instead, their views on spirits inhabiting objects and being remain dormant and unarticulated. They could even remain dormant if or when subjects are questioned about their views. If this is the case, then (some) adherents of animism do not have a disposition to form animistic beliefs.

As an alternative, tacitly held animistic beliefs can be regarded as aliefs. The term was introduced by Tamara Gendler. She considers aliefs to be associative, automatic and a-rational. Aliefs are conceptually and developmentally prior to other states like beliefs. They are typically affect-laden and action-oriented. Aliefs can be activated by features of the subject's internal or external environment. Examples of aliefs are cases where people hesitate to cross a tall bridge while knowing that the bridge is perfectly safe. In this case, people *believe* that the bridge is safe but *alieve* that the bridge is dangerous (Gendler, 2008).

Gendler's concept of 'alief' appears to be useful for discussing tacitly held animistic beliefs. Like aliefs, they are often affect-laden and action-orientated and are easily activated by features in the environment. However, tacitly held animistic beliefs are not a-rational and do not run counter to occurrent, affirmed beliefs. Most adherents of animism do not slip back into behavior in line with animism while consciously affirming the opposite like in the bridge example. Instead, their views on animism are usually in line with their other beliefs and behavior. For example, some authors argue that animism implies more respect for non-human animals and the environment. Adherents of animism indeed appear to display this behavior.

An important question for our purposes is whether tacitly held beliefs can be epistemically assessed. Like occurrent beliefs, tacit beliefs are about something.<sup>20</sup> Animistic beliefs, whether tacit or not, make the claim that spirits inhabit objects, plants or beings. That content can be true or false.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, tacit beliefs can be regarded as false if their contents are false and true if their contents are true.

Like occurrent beliefs, tacit beliefs can also be classified as justified or unjustified. Like occurrent beliefs, tacit beliefs can be properly backed up

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<sup>20</sup> The aboutness of beliefs is often called 'intentionality'.

<sup>21</sup> The content could also be assessed as accurate, meaning closer to the truth, or inaccurate, meaning further away from the truth.

by evidence or not. They can also be formed by means of epistemic virtues like open-mindedness or epistemic vices like wishful thinking. Below, we will focus on whether animistic beliefs are based on veridical experiences or not. Tacitly held animistic beliefs need not be assessed in a different way.

## 5 Assessing Animistic Beliefs Epistemically

There are various ways in which one can assess the epistemic status of animistic beliefs. Contemporary skeptics tend to argue that there is insufficient evidence for animism (as they argue is the case for most religious beliefs).<sup>22</sup> Some argue along similar lines as Edward Tylor that animism represents an earlier stage of human development. In light of recent scientific development, animism would no longer be tenable.<sup>23</sup> Arguments for materialism or physicalism, if successful, would also imply that animism is untenable. The same holds for arguments that conclude that spirits need to be tied to a human body.<sup>24</sup> Most of these arguments assume a materialistic ontology that may be foreign to animists. Assessing the arguments for and against materialism lies far beyond the scope of this chapter. For this reason, I will focus on a different challenge.

Rather than looking at arguments for or against an animistic worldview, I will look to how animistic beliefs are formed in individuals. Animistic beliefs are probably often transmitted through learning, socialization or other forms of cultural learning. It is, however, also reasonable to assume that animistic beliefs are often formed after, or reinforced by, experiences or seemings. We saw how Bird-David argues that animism mainly consists of engagement with objects or animals as if they are spirited. It is likely that such engagements are often accompanied by experiences where it seems to subjects that those objects or animals are spirited.

There is also anthropological evidence for animistic experiences or seemings. Charles Whitehead argues that people in animistic societies

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, (Shermer, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> For a recent similar argument, see (Rosenberg, 2020).

<sup>24</sup> For a critique, see (Peels, 2013).

have religious experiences all the time (Whitehead, unpublished). Sometimes the experiences occur under trance. More often, animists have animistic experience in their interactions with nature. Bird-David reports of a Nayaka woman who had stones “come to her”. Inspired stones were seen to have moved or “opened their mouths” (Bird-David, 1999: 74–75). Safonova and Santha note that Siberian Evenki hunters see prey as partners with whom they compete (Safonova & Santha, 2012).

While philosophers differ over the force of experiences and seemings,<sup>25</sup> one influential strand argues that they merit an innocent-until-proven-guilty status.<sup>26</sup> A well-known advocate is Richard Swinburne. He argues that subjects can regard perceptual experiences as solid evidence. He argues that when humans have an experience of *x*, they are in a good position to believe that *x* exists and that *x* is such and such. Not doing so runs against common sense and leads to far-reaching skepticism. Hence beliefs based on such experiences can be regarded as rational. Swinburne extends this claim to include religious experiences. Religious experiences are not radically different than perceptual experiences of physical objects and beings. Therefore, religious beliefs based on religious experiences can be regarded as rational as well (Swinburne, 2004, 2018).

Swinburne’s argument can be applied to animistic experiences as well. During animistic experiences, it seems like an object, plant or animal is inspired. Following Swinburne, the experiences provide good evidence that the object, plant or animal under consideration is indeed inspired. Accepting that experiences suffice for physical objects, for beings and for God, but denying it holds for animistic experiences seems ad hoc and unwarranted.

According to Swinburne any subject is *rational* or *justified* when she forms beliefs based on experiences. While there is widespread agreement that ‘being rational’ and ‘being justified’ are positive epistemic statuses, there is little agreement on their exact natures. Rationality also encompasses various, very different concepts like practical rationality, scientific rationality and moral rationality. Other, related concepts have been

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<sup>25</sup> A widely discussed problem states that experiences lack conceptual structure and therefore cannot justify beliefs that do (Sellars, 1956).

<sup>26</sup> See (Huemer, 2007).

delineated more clearly. For example, Mylan Engel defines *personal justification* as “S is personally justified in believing that p iff S has come to believe that p in an epistemically responsible fashion” (Engel, 1992). There is ample discussion about when a subject comes to believe something in a responsible way.<sup>27</sup> This discussion lies well beyond the scope of this chapter. Authors like Swinburne argue that relying on experiences is one way in which subjects can form beliefs in a responsible way.

Engel contrasts personal justification to *doxastic justification*. While personal justification is a subjective concept, doxastic justification is objective. According to Engel a belief is doxastically justified if and only if it “has a high objective probability of being true” (Engel, 1992: 138). Assessing whether animistic beliefs are doxastically justified would require looking at all available evidence for animistic claims. Such an assessment would have to investigate whether animism is compatible with well-established scientific claims like the conservation of energy or Darwinian natural selection. For the remainder of this chapter, I will continue to focus on personal justification.

Swinburne and likeminded philosophers do accept that experience can lead people astray. Swinburne distinguishes four underminers to think that experience leads us astray. First, an experience might be of a kind that proved not to be genuine perceptions in the past. For example, experiences during dreams generally do not reflect the real world. Therefore experiences during dreams are suspect. Second, there may be evidence that an experience occurred in circumstances where similar experiences turned out to be misleading. For example, we know that sticks appear as bended when we put them halfway in water. Third, there may be evidence that the object of experience likely was not present during the experience. Finally, there can be evidence that an experience was not caused by the object of experience (Swinburne, 2004).

If an animist were to learn that animistic experiences are undermined in any of the four ways distinguished by Swinburne she would no longer be personally justified in holding animistic beliefs. Personal justification could be regained if the animist learns of new reasons to accept animism.

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, (Zagzebski, 1996).

In the next section, I will focus on Swinburne's second and fourth reasons to doubt experiences. The reason is that animistic experiences appear to withstand the first reason. Animistic experiences do not resemble experience that we know to be non-genuine. Arguing that inspirited objects or animals are in fact not present during animistic experiences could come in the form of (scientific) evidence that animals, plants or objects are in fact not inspirited. If this is shown, the animist is mistaking non-spirited things for inspirited ones. Assessing such underminers would again require investigating whether animistic claims are compatible with well-established scientific claims. This falls outside the scope of this chapter. To assess whether the experiences fall prey to Swinburne's second or fourth underminer, I look at empirical data that might support such a claim in the next section.

## 6 Underminers for Animistic Beliefs

In the next sections, I discuss empirical evidence that animistic experiences or seemings occur in situations that proved to be misleading. I also discuss evidence that such experiences are (often) not caused by inspirited objects or animals. Both can undermine the evidential force of animistic experiences and render a lot of animistic beliefs not rational. Both kinds of evidence point out that humans sometimes 'misread' or 'misinterpret' their environment. The first emphasized how the environment leads humans astray and the second is more general. In the remainder of this chapter, I will refer to misreadings or misinterpretation during experiences as 'misattributions'. Similar arguments have been raised against belief in God. Some authors have argued that belief in God stems from such a 'misattribution' and is therefore not rational.<sup>28</sup>

Evidence that animistic experiences stem from misattributions would not harm animistic beliefs that are grounded in rational arguments or testimony. Given that a lot of animists likely rely on experiences to form or sustain animistic beliefs, the implications are still rather wide.

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<sup>28</sup> Examples are (Law, 2016; Nola, 2013, 2018). For a reply, see (Van Eyghen, 2020).

To assess whether animistic beliefs stem from misattributions, we need an account of how animistic beliefs are formed. Explanations for how animistic beliefs are formed are as old as the term. Edward Tylor (see above) defended his own account. He argues that animism evolved from reflection on death, dreams and apparitions. For example, dreams of dead kin or friends would be regarded as evidence that their spirits were still out there. This would give rise to a ‘doctrine of spirits’ and the idea that objects, plants and animals are spirited (Tylor, 1871). If animistic beliefs indeed stem from interpretations of dreams and dreams are bad guides to reality, this would count against their rationality.<sup>29</sup>

Willerslev argues that Tylor’s claim that reflections on dreams give rise to beliefs on spirits has some traction (Willerslev, 2007). Nonetheless, Tylor’s explanation is not often defended by contemporary psychologists or cognitive scientists. Below, I discuss recent explanations of animism or relevant empirical findings that can help in construing such an explanation. While all are defended and discussed in isolation, they appear to be compatible.

## 7 Stewart Guthrie’s Account of Animism

Stewart Guthrie defends a cognitive explanation of how people form animistic beliefs. In contrast to Tylor, Guthrie refers to cognitive biases or tendencies that give rise to animistic beliefs. His theory has been criticized and reformulated (See: Barrett, 2004; Van Leeuwen & Van Elk, 2018). In this section, I focus on Guthrie’s original theory.

Guthrie distinguishes ‘animism’ from ‘anthropomorphism’. Animism is “attributing characteristics of living things (e.g. sentience and spontaneous motion) to inanimate things and events” (Guthrie, 2001). Anthropomorphism is “attributing characteristics of humanity (e.g. language and symbolism) to non-human things and events, including other animals” (Guthrie, 2001). Guthrie adds that humans often do both at the same time (Guthrie, 1993). While attributing sentience and spontaneous

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<sup>29</sup>The defender could of course deny the second part and insist that dreams are good guides to reality.



motion is one minor aspect of animism, it does not explain why people attribute abilities 1–3 to objects and animals. I will therefore focus on Guthrie's account of anthropomorphism.

According to Guthrie, animistic beliefs can be explained by a closer look at human perception and cognition. He notes that we often see non-living things as alive (Guthrie, 1993). A famous example is the Heider Simmel experiment. Subjects were shown a short animation of two triangles and a dot that moved in and out of a secluded area. Afterward, subjects recollected what they saw in terms of stories. Some said that the triangles were “in love” or were “chasing one another” (Heider & Simmel, 1944). Such properties are only meaningfully used for living things and subjects know full well that the triangles and dot are not alive.

The inclination to see things as alive is no accident but a useful evolutionary strategy according to Guthrie. Living things often pose a threat. Especially for our prehistoric ancestors, encounters with predators and other humans were a prime cause of death. For this reason, it makes evolutionary sense to be on guard for living things. Seeing too many living things is at worst a waste of time and energy. Seeing one living thing too little could easily mean instant death (Guthrie, 1993).

Our propensity to easily conclude that things are alive could explain animism. According to Guthrie, animistic beliefs stem from ‘false positives’ (Guthrie, 2002). People erroneously conclude that objects or plants display agency and conclude that they are spirited. Humans can overcome their evolved tendency by reflecting on increased knowledge.

One could object that Guthrie assumes the falsity of animism. He appears to assume that humans are making mistakes when they see objects or plants as alive but not when they do the same for humans. Guthrie does not provide arguments to think that this is the case. While Guthrie might have similar assumptions, they do not undermine his claim that humans easily mistakenly see things as living. As Guthrie notes, humans often attribute agency to computers or cars. These objects are regarded as inanimate by animists as well. Guthrie's case that human attribution of agency is error-prone is therefore not clearly dependent on his assumptions.

There are other reasons to think that Guthrie's account does not show that animistic beliefs result from misattributions. My discussion above shows that Guthrie primarily explains why humans easily attribute *agency*.

I argued above that animistic beliefs encompass more than agency, namely the belief that (some) objects, plants and animals have mental capacities as well. Guthrie does not explain the attribution of mental capacities.

There is another reason to doubt that Guthrie's account harms animistic beliefs. Guthrie argues that humans easily get the sense that objects or plants have agency. This sense amounts to little more than a hunch or feeling that something is alive. Guthrie acknowledges that these hunches are usually discarded. The examples of animistic experiences I discussed above do not resemble such hunches. The experiences are more like long-lasting encounters. It is unlikely that hunches which are easily discarded provide the foundation for such experiences.

Animistic experiences do not fit well into Guthrie's account for yet another reason. Because of our hypersensitivity for living things, attribution of agency would occur very frequently. The slightest sign would suffice to get a hunch that some object is alive. Animists, however, are not all that quick to see something as animate. Bird-David notes that the Nayaka certainly do not see all objects, plants or animals as inspirited (Bird-David, 1999). Usually a limited class of objects, plants or animals is regarded as inspirited. If animistic beliefs stem from our proneness to detect living things, we would expect animists to consider a lot more as inspirited.

## 8 Mistaken Attribution of Agency

Guthrie's account is specially tailored for explaining animistic beliefs. An argument against the rationality of animistic beliefs could also look broader. I argued above that animists attribute three abilities to objects and animals. The first two abilities are part of mentality, and the third of agency. An argument could look at how humans usually attribute agency or mentality. I look at the attribution of agency in this section and that of mentality in the next. I will not look at attributions of a spiritual essence to objects, plants or objects. Scientific accounts of how such an attribution occurs are (nearly) non-existent. To my knowledge, this form has not been subject to experimental investigation as well. For these reasons, I focus on agency and mentality.

There is ample literature on how humans attribute agency to others. There are also examples of where the attribution goes wrong. The defender of a debunking argument could point to the latter and argue that the way in which animistic beliefs are formed resembles them. Below, I give a brief summary of recent empirical data on misattribution of agency. I discuss four situations where humans easily misattribute agency:

similarity,  
ambiguity,  
false prior beliefs and  
triggers.

A first situation (1) where humans easily misattribute agency to others is when others perform similar actions as they do. Nomura et al. conducted an experiment where people were asked to manipulate a mouse to control a cursor. At the same time someone else was performing a similar bodily action but did not in fact control the cursor. Subjects were prone to state that the other was moving the cursor as well. They were thus prone to erroneously attribute agency to others. The authors suggest that misattributions of agency of this kind could also occur when people are performing a similar dance (Nomura et al., 2019).<sup>30</sup>

Attribution of agency to objects or animals only minimally resembles the experimental setup. Animals may sometimes behave like humans do and thereby prompt humans to misattribute agency. However, usually animals behave rather differently. For example, some anthropologists note that animistic beliefs are more salient during hunts (e.g. Willerslev, 2007). During hunts, animal preys behave very different than human hunters. Therefore it is unlikely that an attribution of agency results from performing similar actions in these cases. Differences in behavior are even greater with plants or objects since these do not display much behavior at all. This all makes it unlikely that attribution of agency to objects or animals results from mistake (1).

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<sup>30</sup> Jeffrey Bednark and Elisabeth Franz provide additional evidence for a proneness toward these misattributions of agency (Bednark & Franz, 2014).

Another situation (2) where humans easily misattribute agency to others are situations with an ambiguous correspondence between action and outcome. Possibly, humans are more prone to attribute agency to others when the outcome is unexpected given the action. Similarly, animists could attribute agency to objects or animals because some observed behavior or phenomenon is ambiguous. Bednark and Franz, however, conclude that ambiguity leads to *less* attribution of agency in others rather than more (Bednark & Franz, 2014).

Human agency attribution might also easily be led astray (3) when humans have false prior beliefs about agency (Desantis et al., 2012). It might very well seem that objects and animals have agency to animists because they hold animistic beliefs. Seemings might in turn reinforce animistic beliefs and thereby create a self-reinforcing feedback loop. The main problem with an argument that relies on (3) is that it presupposes the falsity of animistic beliefs. Prior animistic beliefs only lead to misguided attributions of agency in objects and animals if these prior beliefs are false. If animistic beliefs are correct, they lead to correct attributions instead. An argument that concludes to the non-rationality of animistic beliefs and relies on (3) would thus be question-begging.

A next class of situations (4) fostering misattribution of agency is situations where humans are triggered to do so. Some evidence suggests that humans are easily led astray when they are primed to think that others will perform intentional actions (Moore et al., 2009; Sato, 2009). Animists might be willingly led to 'see' agency in objects and plants by frequently reminding them that these are spirited. Again, an argument against animistic beliefs that relies on (4) would assume the falsity of animism and would therefore be question-begging. Furthermore, Bird-David's suggestion that animistic beliefs often remain unarticulated (see above) makes it unlikely that animists are willingly primed to 'see' agency in objects and animals.

The evidence discussed so far does not make it likely that animists attribute agency to objects or animals in situations that lead them astray. Therefore, we have no reason to think that animistic beliefs result from misattributions and resulting beliefs are rendered not rational. Animists might also make mistakes when they attribute abilities 1–2. In the next section, I will look at evidence for that claim.

## 9 Attributing Mentality

We discussed the (mis)attribution of agency in the previous section. Having agency implies the ability to perform intentional actions and therefore covers ability (3). In this section, I look at the attribution of abilities (1–2). Both abilities (communication and reflection) are frequently discussed under the header ‘mentality’. We say that humans have mentality because (among other things) they can communicate and reflect. Assessments of whether primates, dolphins or other animals have a mental life often also look at both abilities. Below, I discuss reasons to think that attribution of mentality sometimes goes wrong. Like before, I discuss whether the evidence gives us reasons to think that attribution of mentality to animals, plants or objects goes wrong as well.

Most contemporary cognitive scientists and psychologists accept that the attribution of mentality is mediated by the theory of mind (ToM). The term designates the faculty (or faculties) that allow(s) humans to attribute and understand mental phenomena like beliefs, desires and intentions. According to most theorists, the theory of mind (ToM) is triggered by outward behavior and postulates minds, beliefs and other mental phenomena to explain this behavior. For example, when humans see someone smiling, the behavior is explained by postulating that the person is happy. The explanations can be revised in accordance with new evidence. Evidence that the person in the example is faking a smile will prompt a revision.

Like most cognitive mechanisms, the ToM sometimes goes astray and misattributes mentality. Below, I discuss three situations:

meaningful experiences,  
perceived as ‘warm’ and  
perceived as competent.

Jesse Bering argues that the ToM is highly important for human lives and human survival. As a result, humans apply their ToM to more phenomena than outward (human) behavior. He argues that humans also apply ToM to find explanations for meaningful events. Examples of

meaningful events are experiences of awe or life-changing events like having a child. Because meaning is intuitively connected to intention, meaningful events are explained in terms of mental capacities. Since ordinary humans lack the powers to bring about a lot of meaningful events, humans (by virtue of their ToMs) explain these by postulating an ultimate, divine mind (Bering, 2002).

Bering's theory offers an explanation for how humans form beliefs about God rather than animistic beliefs. He does suggest a situation (1) where ToM easily goes astray. People would easily misattribute mentality when they perceive situations as meaningful. His theory can be extended to account for animism.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps people have profoundly meaningful encounters with animals or some objects. If these encounters are accompanied by awe or have a meaningful impact on human lives, humans might be prone to attribute mentality. Even if this were the case, it would not show that animistic experiences in these situations result from misattributions. Bering assumes that the intuitive connection between meaningfulness and intentionality is often unwarranted. Perhaps meaningfulness is a good indicator of mentality and attributing mentality accordingly is perfectly warranted.

People often misattribute mental capacities to groups or organizations. While this has no immediate bearing on animistic beliefs, these attributions may be mediated by perceiving groups or organizations as warm and/or competent. Humans do not attribute mentality to all groups. Fiske et al. conclude from neuroimaging studies that humans easily attribute mental capacities when groups are perceived as warm (2) (Fiske, 2009). Attribution of mentality to 'warm organizations' like charitable groups comes more easily than attribution to 'cold organizations' like government bureaucracies. This raises the possibility that humans easily misattribute mentality when they perceive a thing or a being as warm.

A second mediating factor that supports attribution of mentality to groups is competence. Competent organizations are more easily seen as having mental capacities than incompetent ones (Fiske, 2009). In one

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<sup>31</sup> Alexander Rosenberg makes a similar point when he accuses the theory of mind of promiscuously anthropomorphizing nearly everything. Like Bering, Rosenberg does not really argue for why the ToM is making mistakes when it anthropomorphizes objects or animals (Rosenberg, 2020).

study, subjects attributed more mentality to Cathay Pacific Airlines than to the NGO World Vision (Au & Ng, 2021).

Do (2) and (3) raise problems for animists? Some objects or animals are probably seen as warm and/or competent. Siberian animistic hunters likely note the competence of animals in escaping or hiding. Animists probably also experience forms of affection for animals or objects. However, concluding that all attributions of mentality based on perceived warmth or competence are misguided goes too far. Warmth or competence might lead humans astray in attributing mentality to organizations but it is often a good indicator of mentality in humans. Noting that young children develop competence in some area or develop empathy is a good indicator that they have increased mental capacities. Reduced competence or empathy in patients suffering from dementia is also a good indicator of reduced mentality.

Proneness to misattribute mentality in situations 1–3 therefore does not show that animistic beliefs likely result from misattributions. As was the case for attribution of agency, there might be other situations that lead humans astray. The empirical evidence I discussed so far, however, does not harm the epistemic status of animistic beliefs.

## 10 Concluding Remarks: Interpreting or Misinterpreting the World?

I argued that animistic beliefs can be supported by animistic experiences. If one grants that experiences can be regarded as good evidence for beliefs, then there is no reason to exempt animistic experiences. As a result animists who form beliefs based on animistic experiences are personally justified. I also argued that while experiences can be undermined in various ways, the scientific evidence discussed gives us no reason to think that they are. As a result, animistic beliefs stand undefeated.

My conclusion implies that animists can continue to regard their beliefs as justified in the light of recent scientific evidence. I have not argued for the overall doxastic justification of animistic beliefs. Arguing that animism is the most probable position to adopt requires additional

arguments. One would need to argue that animistic experiences have evidential force for others who did not share in the experiences.<sup>32</sup> One would also need to argue that animism is more rational than its alternatives (materialism, strict theism or others).

Epistemic debunking arguments that rely on empirical evidence for how a belief is formed are often accused of committing the genetic fallacy. One commits the genetic fallacy if one concludes that a belief is epistemically suspect when one has shown how that belief is formed. Arguing that beliefs are not justified because they are based on misattributions does not fall prey to this fallacy. Such arguments do not merely state how a belief is formed. They also note that a belief is rooted in a *mistake*, namely a wrongful interpretation or reading of the environment. Because mistakes clearly have negative epistemic implications, pointing to misattributions can undermine the rationality of beliefs.

I argued that the evidence I surveyed does not show that animistic beliefs are based on misattributions. My arguments, however, do not show that similar future arguments cannot be successful. It is possible that new scientific discoveries can build a better case to undermine animism. They might point to other situations where humans are prone to misattribute agency and mentality that do apply to animistic experiences. There is no a priori reason to think that this is impossible. A future successful argument would need to show that *both* the attribution of agency and the attribution of mentality (likely) go astray when humans have animistic experiences. The situations I discussed above, at best, only apply to one of both.

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<sup>32</sup>Richard Swinburne indeed argues that religious experiences have evidential force for others because testimony ought to be regarded as trustworthy in the absence of reasons to doubt it (Swinburne, 2004). There seems to be no reason why his argument cannot be applied to testimony of animistic experiences as well. One potential reason to doubt that testimony of animistic experiences is equally forceful is that animistic experiences might be less ubiquitous than religious experiences. A proper assessment of this lies beyond the scope of this chapter.



## 11 Coda: Moral Arguments for Animism

Some anthropologists note that animists tend to have greater respect for their environment (e.g. Harvey, 2005). The link between animism and greater respect for the environment is fairly obvious. Regarding (some) animals, plants and objects as spirited puts constraints on instrumentalizing nature. If nature is just mindless matter, the only constraints on using nature are the need for resources in the future or aesthetic reasons for preserving nature. While these might get us some way toward protecting nature, these constraints have proved not to be forceful enough or to be easily overridden by other needs. If nature is to some extent spirited, nature is easily regarded as having intrinsic value. Seeing intrinsic value implies greater respect and seeing nature as an end in itself. An animistic view of nature could therefore help solve ecological challenges like widespread pollution or anthropogenic global warming.

Traditionally moral reasons are kept strictly separated from epistemic reasons. Recently some argued that the separation is too strict. An increasing number of epistemologists argue for ‘moral encroachment’. The thesis is aptly defined by Sarah Moss as “[t]he epistemic status of an opinion can depend on its moral features” (Moss, 2018: 177). Examples of when moral implications of a belief are relevant are beliefs on racial profiling or structural oppression (Moss, 2018).<sup>33</sup>

Defenders of moral encroachment usually do not provide strict criteria for when moral implications are relevant for the epistemic status of beliefs or opinions. The examples they provide signal that moral encroachment becomes more important if the stakes are high. Rejecting racial profiling or structural oppression arguably has profound real-life implications. Because of the importance of accepting or rejecting these views, moral implications have considerable weight. Given the importance of contemporary ecological challenges, animistic beliefs appear to fit this criterion remarkably well. Global warming is often considered to be one of the major challenges for humanity in the twenty-first century. Pollution of the oceans threatens ecological systems and species. Therefore, the stakes rule in favor of accepting animistic beliefs for moral reasons as well.

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<sup>33</sup> See (Gardiner, 2018) for a criticism of moral encroachment.

Arguing that moral implications lend additional support for animistic beliefs raises questions. It is not clear how much epistemic support is gained or whether moral reasons will suffice to be justified (personally or doxastically) in holding animist beliefs. It is also not clear whether the moral support for animism is merely temporary and instrumental for the sake of solving ecological crises. These questions lie beyond the scope of this chapter. The potentially profound moral implication of accepting animism does constitute an additional reason alongside the stricter epistemic reasons I discussed above. Together they can constitute a cumulative case for animism.

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