

Part Two

WEIRD people becoming animists

Animism is a way of relating to the world.

It is not a religion, but as Stringer suggests, is instead, “a way of being religious.” By the same token, the Abrahamic religions are representative of another way of being religious: monotheistic revelation through a text and an organized hierarchy. Buddhism and Hinduism are representative of other ways of being religious.

Becoming an animist—for a native speaker of the English language, and a member of the Western European traditions it embodies, such as myself—first and foremost means learning to stop thinking that everything else in the universe is an “it,” and that we humans are something somehow different, special, unique, and therefore beyond the need of being related to or concerned about everything else.

To the animist, humans are persons...people...just like all the other people in the environment: tree people, rock people, wind people, deer people, and so on. But more on that later.

In fact, to become an animist, a person of the Western European tradition must unlearn a great many things they have learned as they became part of their culture.

Nowadays, some (mostly academics) use the acronym WEIRD—Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic—to denote the dominant intellectual thinking pattern of the industrialized world. This way of looking at the world arose in Western Europe during the Enlightenment, and has largely directed the social, political and economic development of the technologically and economically advanced nations for the past 500 years, and especially the last 100 or so years.

It has also influenced most other nations and cultures around the world in that time, including the nation/culture I'm a native of, the United States of America in the late 20th and early 21st Centuries.

Of course, not all the people in those nations, or under their influence, have necessarily fallen under sway of the WEIRD worldview, but many have. But many of those that haven't still have been greatly affected by the WEIRD perspective. It's so influential, that even if you don't subscribe to it, you still have to acknowledge it.

Philosophically, this pattern of thought is currently dominated by Modernism, Materialism/Physicalism, and Humanism—to the point that even the dominant Christian theologies and other viewpoints must address or respond to Modernism, Materialism/Physicalism and Humanism. This includes Post-Modernism, which of course is a reaction to modernism and materialism, and still in many ways operates within the WEIRD paradigm—as an antithesis to modernism's thesis.

It is not an accident that in English we use words in ways that make almost all things entirely inanimate: not he or she, not even them, but “it.” Many languages don't work that way; there is no “it,” or “it” has a much different usage. There

are in these other languages only she, he, them, us, we and so on—pronouns for persons, for beings, even if they are “inanimate” things or “lower” lifeforms to us speaking English and thinking in the Western mode of thought.

But, in English, there has been a mission of the educated—materialists and theists and humanists alike, for the last roughly 500 years—to remove any sense of “being” (other than “itness”) from everything but humans—and sometimes even from non-European humans. Even other living non-human things are “it,” not “us.”

The language has been restructured in such a way, so that we (WEIRD, at least) humans can act with impunity against them, without having to have a relationship, without having to consider needs and rights and the like, because they are lesser, lower, than us, and therefore either by divine right or evolutionary chance subject to our (Enlightened European) human whim.

They are It, property, or even less than property, valueless, unless and until we find some use for them. Something to be ignored or used or disposed of without concern.

Which, of course, they aren't—at least, not to an animist. The effect of living, of being raised, in a culture and its language has been amply demonstrated—people think of things according to the beliefs of their culture (they either accept as a given the common cultural beliefs, or they actively reject them), and the language encapsulates those cultural beliefs, so it is almost impossible for them to not be affected by the common cultural beliefs. It takes real work, real effort, to break out of the paradigm of our language, our culture.

Thus, it is hard to overcome the modernist/materialist preconceptions of our WEIRD society. But it is possible. I am doing so, but there is always more I need to learn, need to incorporate into my life.

Remember, I was enculturated from birth through childhood, youth and adolescence in this culture, and spent from about age 20 to about age 42 trying to be a good WEIRD modernist. It's only been in the last two decades that I have really been trying to unlearn modernism, physicalism and humanism and the other aspects of the Western mindset.

So, how is Animism different?

The first assumption of animism is that everything exists. Oh, sure, it may all be an illusion, as some sages say, but it really seems that in this life we are situated within this reality—even when we can sometimes step through cracks and doors and holes and enter the spirit worlds.

Even if it is all an illusion, it's an illusion we're supposed to be in, play along with, above all to LIVE and EXPERIENCE. The *experience* is what is truly important in life.

But experience isn't all just doing things; for humans, it's also observing things, testing things, learning things, remembering, interpreting, investigating, thinking, creating, singing, dancing, hunting, working, planting, building, laughing, crying....

Second, all those things that exist are not all that different from us; they share at least some traits with us, to some degree, regardless of the differences we can also notice. In the material sense, at least, they are made of the same atoms and energy as us, just in different proportions and arrangements. No matter what

“they” are, they are akin to us in some way, some degree, but only if we choose to look for the relationship, the kinship, instead of focusing only on what makes us different.

Becoming an animist means becoming aware of the similarities, rather than the differences. The WEIRD way seems to be focused on seeing what is different, of drawing careful lines between This and That. This is ensconced in the three rules or laws of logic: of identity, of non-contradiction, and of the excluded middle. And the assumption that all that exists is material, and ONLY material (whether in material or energy form).

The animist way seems to be focused on what is the same or similar, or realizing that most lines we draw are arbitrary, are not accurate or real; they are of our own creation; This and That are not so separate after all.

Of course, this sounds like it is limited to material things, the living and the inanimate. But it is not. More on that later.

The concept of persons

Everything that exists: they are not an it, nor are they its, a plural. They are our kin, our relatives, persons who are not human (for lack of a better concept or term), and but for the accidents of history and evolution that they are not identical in appearance and function to us human persons—or we, them.

Because they are kin, we should acknowledge them as persons. Yes, some are very different as persons than humans—that is, they are very, very distant kin—but we should stretch our minds and encompass ourselves in an extended family

of our relatives who are more or less the same, and yet, different than us—and certainly, they share the same environment as us, so we are not isolated. We should still respect them, extend to them at least some degree of the relationship that we take for granted among humans—at least, among Western Humans.

WEIRD people can begin to comprehend this if they start to think about how related we are to other life. The evidence suggests that humans are one of the millions of multicellular species currently existing that are related to each other through their DNA—and thus to their ancestors back in time, eventually to a single-celled protist (similar to bacteria) common ancestor between all the species, which lived about 3.8 billion years ago.

Actually, that may be wrong; more recent theory suggests that the earliest life, perhaps existing as early as 4.2 billion years ago, may not even have had all the characteristics we currently assign to life, such as DNA, cell structure, and so on. And those earliest forms of life may have existed for more than a billion years before DNA and other features developed and really got started on the road to the present-day diversity.

It doesn't matter to an animist. Even if we're talking about alien life that developed on another planet millions of lightyears away, they are still our kin. We are related by being part of this cosmos.

Starting with humans—because we do pretty much have to refer to ourselves to start to build an animist understanding of the world—we can see that, for example, chimpanzees and bonobos are about 99 percent similar to humans (depending on the method used). That is, they are almost completely persons like us. One only need watch them to see that they think and act much like us—

that we are kin, even if separated by several million years of evolutionary changes.

On the other hand, cattle are maybe 50 or 60 percent like us humans. Plants are about 25 percent similar to humans in their DNA, and so they are persons who are about 25 percent like us. Slime molds (among the simplest of the eukaryotes) are about 18 percent similar, and are therefore persons that percent similar to us. Yes, that means that chimps and bonobos are 1 to 5 percent different, plants 75 percent different, and slime molds 82 percent different. But the point?

Is there any point where there is a clear dividing line between the kindreds? Sure, we can classify based on group likenesses and suchlike, but our classifications are a description of reality, not reality itself.

Even the archaic relatives of bacteria share at least a few percent of the DNA of humans. So, even though they are all very different from us, we can say that they do share at least some of our traits—that they are at least a few percent like us.

We can say they are other-than-human persons who differ from us in many ways, but still share some characteristics. And maybe most WEIRD people can wrap their heads around this concept, and understand the idea of other living things being other-than-human persons.

At the very least, we should recognize that they are our relations, our 'kin,' even if separated by hundreds of million to several billion years of evolution.

But for WEIRD people, the step to inanimate stuff being people is a more difficult jump. When you think about it, some non-living things will become part of living things, and parts of some living things will become part of the nonliving things. So even the inanimate “theys” in the world still have something in common with us humans, against whom we are measuring similarity.

Maybe only a few percent, maybe less—but none of it ever drops to zero percent, even if it comes close. After all, they are still made of matter, of atoms, of energy, and they are here in the world with us, subject to the same laws of physics within the same environmental context. Even in another galaxy.

Some things will never be part of living things as we define them, but they still have some fraction of attributes that are related to humans—made of atoms of the same sort as in humans, subject to gravity and the other forces and laws of physics, and so on. So, even though they may be 99.999 percent different, they are still a little bit like us, even if it’s just 0.001 percent, or even less.

WEIRD people classify them as “It.” Animists, on the other hand, recognize that we can choose to extend to them the category of personhood, a status as persons who are other-than-human, who are deserving of consideration and respect due to any human person, even though they are different. This is what a WEIRD person who is seeking to become an animist must do—stretch the definitions in their minds so that they can make anything else in the universe be a person, just like them.

So, to become an animist, I would say that a WEIRD person must break out of the WEIRD thought patterns, the worldview. It’s not easy to do; I still haven’t completely mastered it. It would probably be easier if I learned a language that was more compatible with animism than English is. But I’m

working on breaking out, because animism is the way I relate to the world, not in the WEIRD way I learned to relate to the world through the dominant culture where and when I live.