

Part Three

Respect for others

Graham Harvey (<https://www.animism.org.uk/>) is one of the leading proponents in the New Animism movement. I like what he put together in his [An Animist Manifesto](https://www.earthboundpeople.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/An-Animist-Manifesto-Graham-Harvey-2012) (PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature no. 9, 201; found at <https://www.earthboundpeople.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/An-Animist-Manifesto-Graham-Harvey-2012>), especially when he talks of the proper attitude of respect between human persons and other-than-human persons. I quote his Manifesto in this section (and will do so again in other sections), and use his thoughts as the basis for a further examination of central ideas in animism (as I understand it), in this case, the idea of respect.

In the manifesto, Harvey first asserts that “all that exists, lives.” For me—and I suspect for almost all native English-speakers of Western background—that assertion is problematic, because of the way we assign categories of living and non-living, animate and inanimate.

I’m also sure that Harvey recognizes this. It’s just that manifestos, by their nature, are supposed to be both forthright and controversial, eye-catching. Harvey is doing it right.

For me, instead of insisting that all is living (which I personally think is a fine way of describing animism), I just say that all that exists is worthy of respect, and by doing so avoid the potential conflict with non-animist WEIRD people in having to argue about whether or not “inanimate” things are living. It’s not relevant to the topic of respect.

Clearly, though, this concept that everything in the universe is at least potentially—or partially—alive, is something that is difficult for WEIRD people to get their minds around. And so I discuss it more in another section. But in this section, I talk about one of the central aspects of animism: Respect, and how it applies to EVERYTHING.

Harvey's Manifesto proceeds by immediately addressing this key issue of my animism: "All that lives is worthy of respect; You don't have to like what you respect; Not liking someone is no reason for not respecting them."

Yes, all that exists is worthy of respect.

Unconditionally. No exceptions. No ifs, ands, or buts. It's a high ideal (at least to WEIRD thinking), but is something that is very different than what WEIRD people experience. We simply don't do respect very well: it's ALWAYS *conditional*; there are ALWAYS 'ifs, ands and buts' about respect in Western culture.

It may be that way in almost all cultures, too. But from what I can tell, animism is about respect. Front and center.

Harvey has a good start, as he introduces but doesn't investigate a distinction of importance—the difference between RESPECT and LIKING. Harvey says you don't have to **like** what you respect; you don't have to **dislike** what you respect, either.

Ask yourself: how do (or should) we treat other humans? Do we HAVE TO like them? No, and we don't HAVE TO dislike them, either. And, there

is of course a third option: not to like or to dislike, but to be indifferent, to be neutral. Frankly, to like or not like is not in any way related to the question of respect.

It seems that not many humans have learned that whether you like, dislike, or are indifferent to others, you **can**, and probably **should** respect them, and treat them as persons worthy of respect. Yeah, but some will counter, “Some people don’t deserve respect—they have to **EARN** my respect.”

Okay, sure. But, when you first meet them, and before you’ve had a chance to learn whether or not they deserve respect or not (and, frankly, they can learn whether or not **YOU** are worthy of respect), do you **DISRESPECT** people? Do you open with disrespect? And do **YOU EXPECT** to be treated with respect? Or do you expect to be treated with disrespect until you have to **EARN** the respect of others? How is this supposed to work? How has that worked out for you?

Opening with disrespect is rude, it’s *impolite*. And frankly, continuing with disrespect, even in the face of rudeness, is *impolite*. All it does is put interactions into a downward spiral. Nobody wins that war.

My animism strongly suggests that everyone—well, humans at least—ought to start by practicing respect as the default position, especially when encountering someone...or something...for the first time. And even after the 1,000th time. Because everything that exists deserves respect, animists extend this presumption of respect to all other persons—human or otherwise.

Why would we do this? I could go all Kantian and talk about the categorical imperative and the like...but that’s a **WEIRD** approach. I prefer a

more direct reason, one that is recognized by virtually all cultures around the world: to treat others as we ourselves want to be treated. It's called 'being polite.'

In another section I discuss humility—the need for humans to stop viewing themselves as the be-all, end-all of existence. Granting respect to others requires a person (human or other-than-human) to at least try to be humble, to recognize that while we have needs and wants that we wish to have filled, so does everyone else. Basing our actions on our perceived self-importance makes it difficult to enter into any sort of respectful relationship. Not having humility certainly makes it hard to be polite, hard to be respectful.

My thought is that regardless of whether you like, dislike, or are indifferent, you should at least treat everyone and everything with respect. Even if you don't really respect them, and even if you don't have to.

Think about it in terms of 'social capital' in human relationships: treating others with respect serves to develop your own individual as well as a general social good-will. Or think about it in terms of game theory: in almost any game where cooperation is allowed, the winning strategy is to cooperate, to not cheat...to in practice respect the other players.

Nor should you expect that what you respect should like you. Mostly, you should expect others to be indifferent to you, because mostly they won't interact with you. But, again, liking and disliking and indifference is simply irrelevant. We expect to be treated with respect; we should do the same for others.

Let me say it again: there are no qualifiers—**EVERYONE** and **EVERYTHING** deserves respect. It's still one of the hardest objectives I strive for, and I think that there are very few in Western culture who actually practice respect for all. I'm working on it, but am nowhere near achieving my goal.

I love where Harvey goes next: “Respecting someone is no reason for not eating them”

Eating is not the only thing you might do with someone, but it's a good focus point, because it is the basic fact of being an animal—although not of all living things, and certainly not of inanimate things. We might eat animate persons (animals, plants, fungi, etc.) but we might do other things to use other kinds of persons that they might resent.

Things like cutting them down to turn into houses and furniture and paper and the like. Or mining them out of the ground, grinding them up and chemically treating them to extract the small fraction of their person that might be useful to us, while we treat the rest as waste to be unceremoniously disposed of, which will probably disrespect and harm others.

Someone might be unhappy to be treated with so little respect.

We also must keep in view that some of the other-than-human persons out there may want to eat us, or use us for their own purposes. Our best bet is to treat them with respect, and hope they do likewise. The best way to ensure that is to respect them with our behavior.

For **WEIRD** people, I like to ask them to consider an advanced alien race that comes to **E**arth. Do we want them to treat us with respect? **O**f

course we do. (Needless to say, lot of modern science fiction is predicated on just this sort of scenario... *War of the Worlds*, *Independence Day*, and the *Twilight Zone* episode *To Serve Man*, to name a few.)

What would be signs of respect? Well, they might make themselves visible, and contact us by radio or other signals, waiting to be invited to land on Earth. They would ask politely how we would like to be treated, and listen to and accommodate our responses. They would respect our rules for living in our own house (the planet)...and of course, they would expect us to follow the rules in their house (their vessel, maybe even outer space in general).

Now, how would we like it if they didn't respect us? Say, they contacted us and we negotiated a treaty...and immediately they violate the treaty. So we negotiate another treaty...this time, not only do they violate the treaty, they kill a lot of people in doing so—say by taking over some of our territory to set up their own city, or to mine our resources. And it happens over and over again, because we can't stop them, and they don't and won't respect us.

Oh, does that sound familiar? Yeah, I think so, too. It's how WEIRD people have dealt with indigenous peoples everywhere else on Earth: people who AREN'T Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic.

In WEIRD culture (and probably many other cultures as well; Imperial Japan comes to mind, which would have been FEIRM...the result was a similar pattern of behavior, however...) respect is *conditional*, is linked to strength or power. A 'natural' hierarchy results: those with strength, with power, are deserving of respect; those without are not. Some will have some power, and so deserve limited respect. Those with power are free, relatively, to exploit those with less power...and those who are denied personhood at all are given no

regard at all. Those with a similar level of power must then negotiate or engage in other interactions to establish a relationship.

That's just the point: WEIRD is just like those aliens invading our planet. Nothing and no one deserves respect, and nothing and no one has any value, until and unless they (the aliens/WEIRD) decide to value it.

Our only option in such a system is that we assert our own value—and if we aren't strong enough to protect our own value, well, from the perspective of the aliens/WEIRD, we just aren't worthy of respect. And it absolutely *SUCKS* to be disrespected.

WEIRD people would be absolutely offended by such disrespect by aliens.