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'Unhappy Lovers'? Difficulties of Spiritual Transition and the Case of Environmentalist 'New Animism'

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Abstract: In this paper, we reflect on difficulties connected with transitioning from one spiritual tradition to another. We consider Western New Animism, sometimes proposed as a remedy to the exploitative and anthropocentric values typical of Western Modernity. New Animism hopes to provide a framework for resilient, pro-environmental attitudes and practices. Referring to Wittgenstein's reflections on religion, magic and culture, as well as the work of Peter Winch, we argue that the possibility of embracing another form of spirituality depends on one's ability to see a 'depth' in it. However, a conversion always has an element of the unpredictable, as we never know in advance what awaits us on the other side. This creates problems for purely pragmatically oriented suggestions to adopt an animist worldview.

Keywords: spiritual tradition; conversion; animism; spirits; depth

1. Introduction

In this paper, we ask what Ludwig Wittgenstein can teach us about the philosophical and cultural challenges posed by New Animism. We address New Animism as a suggestion for remedying what is difficult and unfortunate in the relations between humanity and non-human nature. Many authors (see, e.g., Haraway 1988; Latour 2017; Weber 2019, chap. 1) attribute the deepest roots of these unfortunate relations to central tenets of Western philosophical tradition.

Starting with a brief and schematic description: Historically, when Western philosophy has dealt with human life or explanations of human behaviour, it has overwhelmingly done so from what we may call a humanist point of view, making a sharp distinction between humans and inanimate objects (which have occasionally included also non-human animals). Traditional humanist philosophy has defined the human in terms of consciousness, intentionality, and rational and meaningful action, in contrast with natural processes, phenomena and beings that do not inherently exhibit such features. This dichotomy is not coincidental, as philosophical research fields such as ethics, and human sciences such as history and sociology, by definition deal with meaningful action. A denial of the dichotomy would change those disciplines in profound ways (see, e.g., D'Oro 2021). Traditional humanism has typically faced resistance from materialist (and sometimes positivist) philosophers, who deny that consciousness and intentionality mark human action in any way epistemologically or ontologically distinguishing it from natural processes. Today, humanist philosophy also faces a challenge from the opposite direction, that of New Animism.

New Animism is a heterogeneous movement, but we can point to some distinguishing features. Instead of denying inherent intentionality and consciousness to humans, New

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Animism, on the contrary, extends those concepts also to the natural world. Two other features are also important. Firstly, the challenge is not merely theoretical, because New Animism suggests an overhaul of our general worldview, away from anthropocentric ideas about a special place for humans in the universe. Secondly, New Animism seeks to tap the spiritual resources of Indigenous religions that can show a way to this overhaul.

Participants in this discussion are adamant that we should not go along with the 19th- and early 20th-century anthropological description (propounded by authors such as Edward Tylor and James George Frazer) of animism as 'belief in spirits'. They see that as a theologically underpinned Western imposition that does not reflect native worldviews correctly (see Harvey 2005, p. xi). Instead, they frame animism in terms of a deep connection between humans and non-human nature. Section 2 presents these proposals in some detail.

In Section 3, we introduce Ludwig Wittgenstein's discussions of religion, culture and magic. The aim of the later sections, forming the core of our argument, is to use reading these remarks in order to understand what an extensive overhaul of worldviews might mean. Wittgenstein, as a critic of modernity, was conscious both of the deep connections between philosophy and worldview, and of the fact that the worldview of his European contemporaries was not the only one possible. On the other hand, he also insisted that moving towards a cultural or spiritual tradition (whether old or new), however much admired, was never a matter of a simple decision. It reminded him of the predicament of someone unhappily in love. However, he also maintained that Indigenous and European spiritual traditions have much more in common than we tend to assume. Later Wittgensteinian philosophers such as Peter Winch have developed views on religious and intercultural understanding along similar lines. It is in light of these complex relationships that we review the philosophical suggestions that animism (whether in its Indigenous, revivalist, or 'New' form) may be the answer to the specifically Western and contemporary crisis of our relationship to the non-human.

In Section 4, we discuss various forms a transition to (another) spiritual tradition can take. It appears that the new animists' proposals presuppose something akin to the Post-Reformation notion of a 'change of heart'. Connecting with Wittgenstein and Winch, we ask what such form of adoption of the cultural and spiritual outlook of a different culture might mean in our present circumstances. In Section 5, we discuss various problems connected to this transition combining some incongruous elements. We suggest that New Animism is at bottom not a revival of 'old' Indigenous spirituality, but mainly a tailored response to contemporary *Western* philosophy, retaining some of its central sensibilities and intellectual concerns. This response may fail to take seriously the animist traditions in their own terms, failing thereby to connect to what is of 'depth' in them. On the other hand, conversion in general, including the return to one's own 'home' religious outlook, at present ignored or dormant, is not merely a pragmatic solution to some concern we *already* felt to be important. It is life changing in unpredictable ways. Section 6 is devoted to discussing a related but separate problem: the mismatch between pro-environmentalist attitudes and existing animist traditions. We suggest that New Animism may be glossing over this mismatch and picturing animism in one-dimensionally deterministic (with respect to practice) terms. The concluding Section 7 revisits the question of what is involved in owning or tapping one's *own* 'home' spiritual resources.

We would sum up the view we defend as follows:

(1) Conversion to animism (for a non-animist coming from a secular Modern Western cultural context) would be problematic, due to the lack of a received tradition giving a workable context to such a conversion.

(2) Furthermore, the framework of New Animism may not necessarily be useful for addressing our environmental crises in any case.

(3) On the other hand, an already existing religion, like Christianity, can be inspired towards renewal or restoration to a focus on environmental guardianship after encountering animist traditions, or independently of such an encounter.

2. The Proposals of (New) Animism: A Solution to the Environmental Crisis?

Animism has been, for some time, of keen interest to environmental research and thinking, and generally to environmentalism (von Stuckrad 2023; Harvey 2005, p. 27f). In the first place, animism, occasionally theorised as panpsychism (Conty 2021), has been presented as a *descriptively more adequate* ontology than those of the Western, especially Modern (post-Renaissance) tradition—and, by extension, as a more adequate environmental philosophy (Harvey 2005, chap. 13; Descola 2014, chap. 6). Animistically conceived ontologies typically have *normative* implications as well. As Mathews (2021, sect. 7 and 8) argues, animism has implications on the spatiality, relationality and the fields of energy that all things in the cosmos require, treating things in the universe as *selves* (beings with interests), following the underlying "principle of accommodating others by adapting one's own desires to theirs", which "assures the ongoing regeneration of life". This principle is a normative *law*, "an 'ought' at the very root of cosmic 'is'". Presumably, pre-agrarian Indigenous communities (for instance, in Australia) accommodate this law better than received Western worldviews.

Several authors thus consider forms of animism, mostly Indigenous, as not only descriptively more accurate than Western subject-object dualism, but also as a normatively more proper environmental philosophy and ethics. Thus, animism should be capable of efficiently motivating appropriate, pro-environmental behaviour (e.g., Mathews 2021, sect. 9 and 10). Conty (2022, p. 7) observes that

> as Cartesian dualism has become implausible, it is perhaps time we sought to understand animism both anthropologically in terms of the dominant way of life of indigenous peoples and philosophically in terms of a new conceptual paradigm for the Anthropocene.

Deep down, the appreciation of animism amounts to the perceived need of value replacement: "the values of solidarity and kinship will need to replace economic competition and consumer satisfaction" (Conty 2022, p. 15; cf. Harvey 2005, p. 179). The desired result is a "respectful relationality", presumed to be characteristic of animist settings (Harvey 2005, p. 44; Weber 2020, p. 94f).[1]

'Animism' is a contested term, however, covering heterogeneous ground (see, e.g., Burley 2019, 2023). Speaking of it in the context of a considered move towards pro-environmental behaviour or value replacement refers to several things. Such as, at least, the following:

(i) Various beliefs and practices—classified in Western scholarship as 'religious'—of Indigenous peoples of many regions of the world, especially where the influence of Western modern secularism either was not, or still is not, dominant.
(ii) The revival or re-emergence of (spiritual) beliefs and practices—alternative to dominant Christianity and/or secular modernity, often claiming a link to pre-Christian ('pagan') traditions in Western secularised societies and typically in synergy with broader trends in culture and the arts.
(iii) Philosophical, biological or anthropological theories describing their topics and proposals in animist terms.

What is called 'New Animism' cannot be easily identified with just one of these three items and is rather an aspect of their interplay and interactions: The theories grouped

under (iii) often invoke the anthropological research on (i), which, in turn, offers inputs and stimuli for (ii). What all three items are presumed to share is a vision of the non-human parts of the world—living organisms, geological formations or parts of the landscape, or perhaps the whole planet—as partaking in personhood, agency and relationality, in a manner not significantly deficient in comparison to humans.

In practice, the boundaries between (i)–(iii) are anything but sharp. Notwithstanding all honest endeavours of proponents of (iii) to connect with traditional animisms, as in (i), it seems inevitable that environmentally motivated proposals of shifts towards animism aim at versions of animism in the sense of (ii): a (somewhat) new cultural construct, partly spurred by a broader cultural trend, partly intentionally designed with a particular political agenda (cf. Kleinod et al. 2022, and a critical reflection in Burley 2023).

Specifically, indigenous (traditional, 'old') forms of animism are often cited as guidance to the abovementioned eco-political proposals. For example, Andreas Weber (2020, 77f) simply admits, in his biopolitical plea, to "us[ing] the terms 'animistic' and 'Indigenous' interchangeably". However, some proponents of New Animism are relatively open about their pragmatic approach here, framing this endeavour as (*our*) "repurposing" of animist ideas to deal with the current ecological crisis (e.g., Bennett 2021, p. 163).[2]

Strengthening Indigenous and, generally, locally based ways of life and rights against market-driven and bureaucratic modernisation attempts very often has a demonstrable value. However, the suggestion often points in a different direction: it is that the Western world generally needs to reconsider its concepts, even that of 'rights', which of course should imply that even 'Indigenous rights' become a problematic tool for political change.

3. Wittgenstein on Tradition

Wittgenstein often wondered whether his philosophy had any chance of obtaining an audience. A Central European immigrant in England, he frequently indicated his unease with the culture of his adopted country.[3] He also reflected on his relation to the larger European civilization of his time and felt equally estranged. A famous example is his 1930 "Sketch for a Foreword" in *Culture and Value* (Wittgenstein 1998, p. 9). He stated that he "contemplate[d] the current of European civilization without sympathy, without understanding its aims if any". Wittgenstein assumed his own cultural ideal came from Schumann's time, around 1850, after which culture took the wrong turn (Wittgenstein 1998, p. 4). A central complaint for Wittgenstein was that contemporary culture involved a distorted role in science: "In order to marvel human beings—and perhaps peoples—have to wake up. Science is a way of sending them off to sleep again" (Wittgenstein 1998, p. 7).

At the same time, Wittgenstein was consciously the child of a certain place and time. He often reflected on what it meant to feel at home in a culture and the difficulties of adopting a new one. In his *Lectures & Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* of 1938, he addressed the notion of aesthetic reactions. Aesthetic reactions come to us naturally, effortlessly, but they presuppose long habituation, resulting in a "cultured taste" (Wittgenstein 1999, p. 8). Wittgenstein described activities where he certainly did feel confident, such as musical appreciation and choosing a suit (p. 5). He compared this with the situation of a European who learns to appreciate African art (p. 8f). Being in tune with a tradition does not consist in admiring it, nor in the ability to produce similar work, but in the fact that, in a tradition we understand, we can tell good work from bad. That, in turn, involves understanding the kinds of problems and choices that the producer would confront.

The situation of a European collector of African art is "[e]ntirely different to an educated Negro's" (*sic*)—by this we assume Wittgenstein means an African educated in the culture of his country of origin. As a European, the art collector can fill his home with

imported artworks and admire them, but he has no first-hand familiarity with their normal use, history and techniques—all of which would give him a natural foothold from which to tell the difference between good and mediocre art. As Wittgenstein indicated later: a tradition, however much admired, may be completely outside of one's reach.

> Tradition is not something a man can learn; not a thread he can pick up when he feels like it; any more than a man can choose his own ancestors.
>
> Someone lacking a tradition who would like to have one is like a man unhappily in love.
>
> There is a pathos peculiar to the man who is happily in love as well as to the one who is unhappily in love.
>
> But it is harder to bear yourself well when you are unhappily in love than when you are happily in love. (Wittgenstein 1998, p. 86)

The apparent implication is that, in our relation to certain cultural traditions, we are doomed to just viewing them from the outside, in an attitude of unrequited, unhappy love. Wittgenstein seems here to be thinking of his own case as well. In an entry from 1931, he is pained with the thought that he is unable to contribute with anything new and entirely his own: "It is much harder to be poor voluntarily if you *can't help* being poor, than when you might also be rich" (Wittgenstein 1998, p. 16). These two cases of helpless longing share a combination of the experienced incapacity to understand even what it is like to be 'there', with the negative manner in which this helplessness affects one's demeanour 'here'.

Confrontations with definitely 'alien', non-European cultures provide especially striking examples of such an impasse. Wittgenstein's "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*" is his attempt to come to terms with such encounters. For him, anthropologist J. G. Frazer represents something like the European art collector, who just goes "Ah!" in front of his *objets d'art* but cannot help imposing his parochial standards on them:

> What narrowness of spiritual life we find in Frazer! Hence the impossibility of grasping a life different from the English one of his time!
>
> Frazer cannot imagine a priest who is not basically an English parson of our times, with all his stupidity and shallowness. (Wittgenstein 2018, p. 38)

Frazer accepted the description 'animism' from E. B. Tylor, but in his hands, it received a rougher treatment than it received from Tylor. For Frazer, magical practices, as in shamanism, inevitably implied the practitioner's self-interested attempt to compel spirits. Thus, it represented the same kind of manipulative interest (for Frazer, a good thing) that later gave rise to science. In contrast, Wittgenstein feels that a deep gulf separates magical beliefs from Western scientific ideas. His caution in approaching non-Western spiritual traditions rests upon his clearer—in comparison to Frazer—notion of religion. Religion, including magical beliefs, is *not a theory* of the world: not an alternative, necessarily inferior, to Modern science:

> [O]ne might say—if [Augustine] was not in error, then surely was the Buddhist saint—or whoever else—whose religion expresses entirely different notions. But none of them was in error except where he was putting forth a theory. (Wittgenstein 2018, p. 32)

A more expanded elaboration of Wittgenstein's observation about this misattribution of theory found its place in the work of Peter Winch (1964 passim, e.g., pp. 314f). We will return to this.

Wittgenstein's notion of religion was strongly modelled on *Christianity*, though, as is clearly seen in his reflections on his own relation to religious belief.[4] Christianity is not

a theory any more than the animist traditions described by Frazer are. Nevertheless, the importance of *theology* and the *doctrinal* aspects of Christianity has exerted influence on early anthropological attempts to describe non-European traditions in terms of 'religious belief': if not as pieces of pseudo-science straightaway, then still as worldviews centrally involving *statements* about what there is and on what plane of existence. Wittgenstein is, for the most part, acutely aware of the tension created by this modelling influence of Christianity. This prompted him to stress that, while the ritual practices of pre-Modern and/or non-Western spiritual traditions are not incomprehensible *per se* even for European observers, they would become such when interpreted as such theories. The support a Western, strongly theology-laden and Christianity-based notion of religion can offer is thus limited and possibly problematic. However, the presence of this notion is undeniable, and it inevitably feeds into even honest attempts to do justice to other spiritual traditions.

Wittgenstein's precautionary emphasis on approaching non-Western religions through their ritual, practical aspect reflects his intuition that theoretical (doctrinal, theological) aspects of religious traditions should be understood, in the first place, as their own 'home' practices' elaborate attempts to *make sense of* themselves. We should neither think of theology as founding these practices, nor as our highway to bridging the gap to the 'other' religion, with no other than translational obstacles.

4. Forms of Spiritual Transition

As we indicated in the previous section, for Wittgenstein, many confusions in our thinking about religious traditions stems from the observers' misidentification of the roles that doctrine (mythology or theology), rituals, other practices of the religious community, and the (self-)reflection of these practices play in the whole of a 'religion', often mistakenly attributing the 'job' performed dominantly by one of these components to another one. The proposals indicated in Section 2 face, we believe, certain problems, the nature of which can be highlighted with the help of making these distinctions more clearly. We do not profess to give an expert opinion on the practicability of these proposals, but rather a series of doubts about what they should mean.

First of all, New Animism advocates a *radical* change in worldview. For an environmentally callous and dogmatically slumbering Westerner, what is at stake is changing from (presumably) a secular person or a nominal Christian to an animist in the sense not (yet?) present among the important components of the person's worldview. This comes close to spiritual conversion. The question is then how to understand such a move.

Historically, there have been various kinds of conversion and missionary practices. People have been changing their religion for purely pragmatic reasons for centuries. This has included specifically political manoeuvres: consider the politically motivated conversion of a Visigoth king in the late Roman period, making Nicene Christianity the official state religion. The King would have changed his life, in some respects at least, in accordance with a new doctrine. Still, he would not necessarily have embraced a Christian life 'through and through'.

Conversions of a 'political' kind are, naturally, possible thanks to existing institutional, ritual and social frameworks for such a move: there is a certified religious authority determining the steps to take. One such step is baptism: a practice sanctioned by an institutional authority, say, the Catholic Church presided over by the Pope. The absence of a 'pope' can be compensated for with a robust setting of rituals and practices where the neophyte can be included.

On the other hand, there are conversions in the sense of an existential 'change of heart', perhaps modelled on a Protestant emphasis on faith. On this typically Post-Reformation conception, religion is, at least in theory, an individually and 'authentically' embraced

system of belief, experience and life. The Post-Reformation conception operates on the register of contrasting one's 'inner' spiritual life with 'outer' practices. Such cases are inherently vulnerable to the suspicion that the 'inner' and the 'outer' do not match. When this happens, what counts is the 'inner'. When Wittgenstein speaks of the difficulty of adopting a new tradition, his considerations are close to this domain; his notion of spiritual life was undoubtedly influenced by the Post-Reformation tradition. However, merely considering the case of someone like Wittgenstein courts the risk of thinking of conversion in a culturally parochial way.

The concept of conversion itself seems best applicable to proselytising religions such as Christianity, Manichaeism, Islam or Judaism in the Roman era. An older conception of religion, typical, for instance, of Roman antiquity, would define religion as a bond (*re-ligio*) between the individual, the city and its gods, expressed as respect and loyalty (*pietas, eusebeia*). Thus, all social and political life had by definition a 'religious' aspect, often expressed in the form of festivals. Consequently, educated Romans were in doubt whether Christianity could be classified as *religio* in the first place. Rather than strengthening social bonds, it encouraged its practitioners to withdraw from the shared life of the city (Wilken 2003, p. 65). On this pre-Christian conception, the adoption of a new *religio* would typically only follow when someone moves into a new city and participates in the local rituals, while perhaps retaining some of his or her old religious practices.

Where would a presumable Modern, Westerner-to-animist conversion stand in this respect? Modern philosophical advocacy of New Animism sends somewhat mixed signals. The emphases range from that of an instrumental-sounding "repurposing" (Bennett) to more general considerations of "value replacement" (Conty), respectful relationality—"living a theory" (Harvey)—, or following the general principle of adapting one's desires to the needs of others (Mathews). 'Repurposing' aside, the suggestions of a change in value system allow for several different readings. In any case, a central element would consist in the idea that the convert should take the relevant, newly embraced concerns *seriously* or, we might say, *authentically*.

We assume that none of the proponents of New Animism would advocate anything like making animism an official religion. At issue is not establishing a practice of going through the motions, but a practice driven by genuine respect. Weber (2020, p. 89) characterises animism as "thinking and enacting the reciprocity among beings", which is a kind of 'knowledge' but one that is "not actually about knowing in a western sense, but about sharing a world" (with Weber, it is always 'animism' in singular). Whether or not the adoption of animist values of respect is construed as a matter of 'religion' (it mostly is not; at least not explicitly), this conception of adopting a new worldview nevertheless operates on a register significantly closer to 'change of heart' than to either a politically motivated conversion or a pre-Christian type of assimilation into a new social environment.

'Sharing a world' can, obviously, be any number of things, including—importantly—*practices*; especially when behaviour towards the non-human world is concerned. But the way in which Weber or Harvey describe animist relationality makes clear that these practices inevitably involve the participant's authentic investment in them. Whether or not we call this 'conversion', it does feature a 'change of heart'. Perhaps it is not important as such to note that this Post-Reformation figure of thought is definitely out of tune with the world of Indigenous animisms. Nevertheless, if we take it seriously, we need to address the problems opened up here, which brings us back to Wittgenstein.

5. Difficulties of the 'Change of Heart'

5.1. Finding a 'Place' for a Tradition, and Finding 'It' at All

First, what needs to be considered is how to identify the target tradition and how to even understand one's future life in its terms. Suppose a dissatisfied secular Westerner takes over some animist practices—perhaps such that centre around the personhood of something previously taken as 'inanimate', not alive (a rock or a lake). *What* is she then doing?

Peter Winch addresses, in several places, the question of how to understand a spiritual practice when it is transferred to a completely new environment. In "Language, Belief and Relativism", Winch returns to his earlier discussion of the Zande poison oracle. If he were to encounter someone in a park in London, administering poison to a chicken, he would not know what to make of it.

> I should be at a loss as to what was going on—I might think him deranged, or perhaps perpetrating a bizarre 'happening'. Culture sets limits to what an individual can intelligibly be said to be doing. This is not to say that there cannot be new cultural developments ('happenings' constituted a new cultural development); but what can count as a new development is also limited by the cultural framework. (Winch 1987, p. 201)

We could not settle the question of what the man in the park is doing by just asking him and accepting the answer. Perhaps he calls himself a priest and replicates the poison oracle from accounts by Evans-Pritchard (and possibly Winch!). However, we could not intelligibly describe him as doing *the same thing* as the Azande, because the cultural 'landscape' where he operates differs from the original. We would face the question of how the ritual relates to the cultural and institutional context of modern urban life, including the prevalence of sciences and technologies not present in the original Central African setting. Not even the exact 'same' ritual is always 'the same'.

Related, but probably less severe versions of this indeterminacy would appear in cases of claimed 'revivals' of ancient *Western* traditions like Druidism or Wicca, and also in connection with just keeping more traditional forms of Christianity alive in new surroundings. Different adaptations, some bumpier than others, focus on different solutions for retaining what one deems to be the core of the tradition—imagine here changes such as the institution of national languages into the Mass. On the other hand, Wicca does not represent a case of *keeping* alive, *adapting* an older, ambient or salient tradition; not quite in the way Christianity is kept alive and adapted. Whatever criticisms were raised against Gerald Gardner, they were not that his *adaptation* was precipitous, badly thought out or too 'progressive' to fit into a *present* tradition. Criticisms of that kind are meaningfully (correctly or not) raised against trends in Christianity. Still, both adaptations, as in Christianity, and (re)creation, as in Wicca, differ from the transplantation of a new spirituality from a different cultural setting. In the latter case, the question of how to judge correct and misplaced versions is itself fundamentally unclear.

In "Language, Belief and Relativism", Winch argues that the idea of translating the poison oracle to the language of a modern Western society runs into the same kind of difficulty as the idea of translating something mathematical into something non-mathematical (Winch 1987, p. 197f). The upshot, we take it, is not that it is impossible because the two languages are just too different. However, the 'translation', or perhaps rephrasing, would consist in *showing the point of* the mathematical expressions (e.g., differential equations) to a 'non-mathematical' person or simply outside the explicitly mathematical context.

> Even if I know little mathematics I have grown up with and live in a community which cultivates mathematics and I am familiar with the position it occupies in the cultural landscape. The poison oracle on the other hand is a feature of

> a cultural landscape which is itself alien to me. Our own culture provides a well-established and well-understood route by which a non-mathematician can learn mathematics. [. . .] But there is no 'application' of Zande magical beliefs and practices in the life which it is open to anyone to lead in contemporary England. (Winch 1987, p. 198)

Differential calculus has a definite place in the cultural landscape, which gives the mathematician various possibilities to explain its significance to someone without deep knowledge of it and helps her guide them in learning it. How the guidance would turn out would depend on the listener's background knowledge and interests. Differential calculus represents the transposition of geometrical form to arithmetic, i.e., numbers. To explain this to someone would be a way to place it in the cultural landscape (of counting with natural numbers and measuring distances and volumes) that they understand.

The task of 'translating' the Zande poison oracle, as it was conducted in Central Africa, to mid-20th Century British or Western thought will need to specify its place in *that* (Central African) cultural landscape, which in turn requires an overview of the whole of the culture. The concern that Winch expressed in "Understanding a Primitive Society" was that we tend to find that place all too quickly. We easily assume that the best analogy is the place that *science* occupies in the culture of an industrial society. This is too simplistic because the poison oracle serves other needs than scientific testing. But even translating it to philosophy or theology would assign to it an intellectual place in a 'landscape' that does not exist in the original context.

This does not mean that translation is impossible, and Winch certainly resisted the relativist implications that would follow. There might be several translations, each adequate in its way. However, the translations would all represent creative (and contestable) thinking, not the mere spelling out of existing equivalences between two sets of terms. The task for someone who wants to adopt animism in an industrial society would involve the creative transposition of Indigenous practices to a completely different landscape and finding (creating?) an *organic* place for them, and for them retaining the meaning they have had, within *this* landscape.

This transposition could not make use of extending, adapting (analogously?) the ambient resources of the Central African ritual, but neither would it be creatively free to the extent that the originators of the 20th century Wicca movement were. It is not a contradiction *per se* to make an effort to adopt a practice, in a way that uses the ambient resources to show its point in the new environment, while being committed to the translated practice remaining *that* practice. However, it involves a creative effort beyond *merely* continuing the tradition in a new milieu, as perhaps an immigrant African family in London might try to do. It is open to challenges from those who struggle (if not straightaway refuse) to see the proposed continuation as authentic or even as making sense at all.

A pointer to this difficulty may be seen in the 'organically' emerging Western instances of extending the notion of personhood, against which animist proposals need to measure themselves. The former Google software engineer, Blake Lemoine, created a *cause célèbre* with his interviews about the *Lamda AI*: "I know a person when I talk to it". There are reasons why ideas about the sentience and personhood of AI are generally accepted in the West with a more open mind than the attribution of personhood to rivers and trees; reasons related to how the notion of 'personhood' has evolved and connecting with other contexts, notions and phenomena such as human-like speech. Animist proposals face additional friction here. It is no coincidence that, compared to the history of technology and its robustly embedded place in Western societies, we have no easy way to introduce animism by reconnecting to presumed pre-Christian *Western* Indigenous spiritual resources. Those lost resources appear themselves as something reconstructed and reinvented (again,

think of Wicca) and hence—paradoxically—as a far less 'organic' and far more 'artificial' cultural presence than the 'personhood' of AI.

Our genuine appreciation of *'folk'* horror fiction and film does not prevent us from seeing them as ingenious *artefacts*. The artistic success of *The Wicker Man* (the 1973 original!) does not hinge upon demonstrating it as anthropologically accurate, i.e., demonstrating its authentic historical genealogy (cf. Wittgenstein 2018, p. 62) any more than the successful artistry of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* must rely on its demonstrable genealogy reaching back to the Gothic period. In comparison to works of art, reconstructed animist beliefs or standpoints might need to conceal the nature of an artefact, rather than playfully admitting it.

5.2. The Problem of 'Depth'

Among Wittgenstein's criticisms of Frazer (and *mutatis mutandis*, Winch's criticisms of Evans-Pritchard), the central one was that by construing native beliefs as proto-scientific theories of supernatural powers, Frazer failed to see the *depth* inherent in the rituals he described. Wittgenstein dwells on the Irish Beltane Festival, where participants cast lots by distributing pieces of a cake. The person who drew the losing lot was singled out as 'dead' (Wittgenstein 2018, p. 60ff). Frazer believed that the custom, now humorous and harmless, was the survival of an ancient practice of human sacrifice. For Wittgenstein, the main takeaway was that it was a "deep and sinister business" (p. 64), regardless of whether there had ever been actual human sacrifices in Ireland. Helping oneself with pointers to the existence of human sacrifices plays only an ancillary role in understanding the practice, since, deep down, "what is sinister lies in the character of these people [who take part in the practice] themselves" (p. 62). The practice gains its deep and sinister character not from its actual genealogy in human sacrifice but from our understanding it as intelligibly driven by the same kind of concern, for the practitioners, as human sacrifice *would* be if they practised it.

This argument is not intended, in the first place, to dismiss the importance of what a religious practice 'originally' was, or 'factually' is about. It only stresses the need for *the observer* to appreciate its depth as something that is *in* the practice. Rush Rhees (1997, p. 92) compares this appreciation with what it means to understand a statement in a way that it, as it were, clicks in: now one understands also what kinds of further queries the statement opens, and with what sense of urgency (and perceives this urgency). It means meeting the practice or ritual in *its own* terms, avoiding Frazer's trap of seeing it as plainly mistaken (and, by implication, stupid), instead seeing how its 'depth' connects with one's own situation.

Animism presents an intriguing challenge here; one that Frazer failed to tackle properly. Anthropologists of Frazer's generation universally described animism as *belief in spirits*. Today, that description is widely seen as a *slight* on the intelligence of Indigenous peoples: as another piece of slanderous colonialist scholarship. This change in attitude does not seem unequivocally to follow from advances in anthropological fieldwork. It seems to connect with an intellectual change in Western academia. In the generally antimetaphysical and secular atmosphere of late 20th-century thinking, it became irrational *for anyone* to believe in spirits. Harvey (2005, p. xi) states calmly that—

> the older usage [of 'animism'. . .] alleges a 'belief in spirits' or 'non-empirical beings', and/or a confusion about life and death among some indigenous people, young children or all religious people. [. . .] However, animism is more accurately understood as being concerned with learning how to be a good person in respectful relationships with other persons.

Weber (2020, p. 89) makes more or less the same point in a more animated language:

> The idea that naïve "native" humans live in a state of nature, adulating spirits and demons in trees, rivers and mountains is a false myth. This misrepresentation stems from projecting the western cognitive mindset on what the so-called "primitive people" are doing, when they, e.g., ritually give thanks to a tree-being. [. . .] Animism is not about material objects being possessed by spirits. It is about constructing a culture on principles which enable reciprocity.

In sum, in New Animism's proposals of what animism can do for us, *as Harvey and Weber* (and others) *want to have it*, animism is not about spirits, it is about treating humans and non-humans as persons (or potential persons) and interacting with them as such. Harvey and Weber react strongly against perceived inadequacies in their inherited, Western philosophical tradition. At the same time, they insist equally strongly on *keeping* another part of this tradition (their home tradition): that it must be confused to believe in spirits.

Then, the question is: If seeing and appreciating a 'depth' in the target spiritual tradition is central for learning from it (for any kind of 'conversion' that counts), what kind of 'depth' is it? If New Animism wants to engage with Indigenous beliefs as a source of spiritual depth, claiming to do justice to them as they are, it ends up with a slightly paradoxical suggestion. In effect, it proposes engaging with only *one part* of animism but leaving another—the 'spirits'—out. Indigenous peoples come across instead as communities of Latourians *avant la lettre*, consorting with rock-actants and mud-actants but keeping a dismissive or indifferent attitude towards any 'spirits'.

Some voices among anthropologists are quite critical of such retellings of Indigenous traditions. Wilkinson's (2017) study of the pre-Columbian Inka culture stresses that the Inka's lack of differentiation between humans and non-humans was not due to "believing that nonhumans could be persons [. . . but rather] they did not believe in persons at all" (p. 304). Wilkinson diagnoses "the modern categories of the human and the person [. . .] incompatible with Inka worlds" (p. 306). Nicolas Peterson's (2011) study of the Australian Aboriginal Warlpiri culture warns against confusing the Warlpiri's "highly intellectual and richly metaphorical ontology" of "the landscape occupied by the spirits of human ancestors and other human-like spirits" with "animistic beliefs about plants, animals and inanimate objects" and "replacing it with an overly literal 'relational' ontology" (p. 177).

Observations of a belief in spirits cannot be dismissed easily, even if we agree that Frazer's intellectual framing of it was unjust. Contemporary anthropology is full of accounts of practices that feature 'spirits'; they would be incomprehensible except as presupposing the presence of 'spirits' of sorts. Consider, for instance, Edith Turner's fascinating account of the extraction of a 'dead hunter's tooth' (*ihamba*) from the body of a possessed woman (Turner et al. 1992, chap. 2). To quote Turner's (1993, p. 9) critique of the practices of post-war anthropologists, they amounted to "an endless series of put-downs as regards the many spirit events in which they participated—'participated' in a kindly pretense".

If this criticism is correct, we obtain a picture that is curiously similar to the tendency Wittgenstein criticised in Frazer. By presenting animism as mistaken proto-science, Frazer tamed the depth of Indigenous worldviews, in accordance with his Late Victorian sensibilities, and presented them as merely a first stage in an ongoing story of scientific progress. Similarly, the retellings of New Animism accept the depth of Indigenous spiritual practices only insofar as they cater to *current* Western sensibilities.

For a modern environmental activist, belief in spirits may be even harder to swallow than Cartesian dualism or, say, the mind-bogglingly layered Buddhist philosophy of mind. She may find it impossible to acknowledge that people she otherwise respects and wants to learn from might hold such a belief. We face a problem of understanding just as severe as the one Winch addressed in his discussion of the Azande.

Part of this problem stems from the kind of gloss on magical practices that Wittgenstein criticised. Frazer's ascriptions of magical beliefs to 'savages' thus in itself did not disturb Wittgenstein, but he took exception to Frazer's descriptions of them as *theories* about causal influences.[5] However, when one wants to frame such theories, they always come out as silly and irrational: as attempts to do the same thing as scientists do, but with an impoverished and false view of the natural world. Yet, if we shed Frazer's theoretical framework, we recognise crucial commonalities between Indigenous and Western (non-scientific) worldviews:

> [N]othing shows our kinship to those savages better than the fact that Frazer has at hand a word as familiar to us as 'ghost' or 'shade' to describe the views of these people. [. . .] [F]ar too little is made of the fact that we count the words "soul" and "spirit" into our own civilized vocabulary. Compared to this, it is a minor detail that we do not believe that our soul eats and drinks. (Wittgenstein 2018, p. 48)

Spirits are not the problem; the secular, modern Westerner's coping with the depth of Indigenous worldviews may begin with trying to see *how exactly* spirits are not a problem.[6] But the difficulty of *this* problem often shows in her avoidance of the challenge.

5.3. Creativity and Unpredictability

The journey of spiritual transition thus requires not only a preference but also endeavour: one needs to find (indeed, *make*) one's way 'there'. This brings us to another point already mentioned: conversion involves creative thinking. However, moving from one spiritual tradition to another, or even between religion and non-religion, is not a jump into the dark. I transition because my new position allows me to see more meaning in the concerns I already have, or it allows me to let go of concerns that press upon me distressingly. As Winch put it in "Understanding a Primitive Society",

> We are not seeking a state in which things will appear to us just as they do to members of S [= the alien society], and perhaps such a state is unattainable anyway. But we are seeking a way of looking at things which goes beyond our previous way in that it has in some way taken account of and incorporated the other way that members of S have of looking at things. Seriously to study another way is necessarily to seek to extend our own—not simply to bring the other way within the already existing boundaries of our own. (Winch 1964, p. 317f)

Concerning this extension of our ways of seeing, there seems to be something nigh impossible about a transition plan if we think it is the *only* durable solution to a different problem, in our case the environmental problem. *That* problem is perhaps only tenuously related to the target tradition, especially if the concerns driving the move have their 'home' elsewhere (where one already is). In addition, if our reason for adopting animism is merely pragmatic, this motivation itself will affect whether the practice we wish to adopt is the *same* practice as 'old' animism (note it was the *latter* that was identified as a source of the solution). For the 'old' animists, in contrast, their animism does not grow out of a decision but from being there from the beginning.

Spiritual life inherently involves the possibility of moving from a casual to a more profound understanding of its ideas and concerns as one grows older. This is true also in an Indigenous setting, where it often has an institutional framing in *rites de passage.* Indigenous forms of life involve extending the participants' (spiritual) 'ways' in a sense similar to how extending one's 'ways' happens 'organically' in other societies. It requires more than just generically 'making sense', as one would also do when making new acquaintances or shopping grocery in a new supermarket.

But then what about a modern Westerner, unhappy with the course the world is taking, who hopes to tap the resources of animism in search for a more adequate ethical

and spiritual life? Can she be confident that she *will* become an animist—in the sense of what she now, from her present, non-animist standpoint, thinks or hopes animism *to be*?

This is a problem similar to what L. A. Paul (2014) discusses in relation to 'transformative experiences'. An experience is truly transformative, i.e., *personally* transformative, if it involves also the unpredictability of one's own future viewpoint, including one's evaluation of the outcomes of the experience. Paul's examples include becoming a parent, which may turn out to be more or less what one expected, but also profoundly unlike it, with an unpredictably wide degree of liberty of mixing these components. Becoming an animist would hardly be much different in this respect.

Let us finally consider the parallel of, arguably, a much more mundane transformative change. Most of us who live off writing philosophy—and, sadly, most people reading our writings—got to this point by studying philosophy at a university. This was something many of us intentionally decided to do, often, presumably, with the ambition of 'becoming philosophers'. Whether or not these initial motivations were honest or honourable, studying philosophy would definitely not be what it is if it were not the case that we make it into what it is only 'as we go along'. Indeed, if a philosopher in her fifties (let us say, one not profoundly unhappy and alienated from her work) met neatly her expectations, plans and ambitions from when she was a brooding teenager going to college, what should we say? It would indicate either an *uncannily* mature teenager, frighteningly 'adult-like' in her thinking, or an adult who never grew up but *not* in the sense of keeping a youthful, agile spirit.

Thus, we assume that the spiritual and intellectual transition to a new way of thinking involves an essentially unpredictable development. At the same time, we make sense of the transition by seeing how something in our original concerns has led to it.

One thing distinguishing such creative self-transformations from cases of truly, chaotically and confusingly dramatic uprooting—as 'when Dorothy left Kansas'—would be that the way to go may in fact be shorter and less dramatic than one thinks. Genuinely wishing for a 'change of heart' is not too far from the change of heart itself, as when 'mere willingness' itself can be a sufficient qualification for employment. Chesterton's example of such a job was martyrdom, but perhaps the animist change of heart is similar. At any rate, it seems to us that it may be far likelier that, even as a modern Westerner, one *is* to a surprising extent already 'there'. If not, it may nevertheless turn out that 'getting there' and the 'there' itself may look very different from what one has imagined.

6. The Fittingness of Concepts

The distance between Western Modernity and animism may not be quite like what the proposals of opting for animism might need—it might be either significantly shorter or unpredictably long (wholly unpredictable). This issue relates to a more general problem of the presumed relationship between spiritual tradition and environmental practice.

6.1. A Wrong Pick?

In the first step, we focus on the more literal level of the problem of the relationship between the presence/absence of animism as the home spiritual tradition, and the environmental practice motivated by the *present* tradition. Here, our point is generally sceptical: connecting with animism constitutes neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for good pro-environmental behaviour.

6.1.1. Is Animism Sufficient?

This part could be opened (and closed) by pointing to various cases where *actual* cultural practices described as animist do not 'live up' to the environmentalist expectations of

Western 'New Animism'. In Harvey's view, a shared trait attributable to various animisms is that "animists live a theory [*sic*] of personhood and selfhood that radically challenges the dominant point of view, which is that of modernity". The Animist challenge concerns, among other things, positing a different relationship between nature and culture, but also a challenge to the "claims of human uniqueness" (Harvey 2005, p. xviiif). Thus, according to Harvey, ('old') animists may not *have* a theory of what all counts as a person, but they supposedly still "live" something that can be construed as a theory, which involves the shared concern for behaving respectfully towards all (that count for) persons.

However, as we have already hinted above, there are *many* (even 'old') animisms. Some animisms explicitly work with deeply ingrained values of respect for non-human persons, but others refrain from stating any such agenda, and yet others may embody views of animals as *resources*, infinitely renewable (see the overview in Burley 2019, sect. IV).[7] Moreover, actual hunting practices may be out of sync with professed beliefs. For example, the large avifauna of Madagascar (*Aepyornis*) or New Zealand (*moa*) became extinct due to human hunting practices even before the arrival of European colonial settlers. Neither animist *beliefs* nor *ritual practices* were an obstacle.

At the heart of this problem of sweepingly favourable generalisations about animism may be the rather cavalier way those re-descriptions apply their notion of a person. Already one of the pioneers of the contemporary interest in animism, anthropologist Irving Hallowell, analyses his observations of the Ojibwe in such terms. Reportedly, Ojibwe practices involve a reciprocal relationship between a human and a piece of non-human nature (a rock), featuring the human "projection" of "'person' attributes to the object" (Hallowell as quoted in Burley 2019, p. 471; see the sympathetic overview in Harvey 2005, p. 17ff). However, New Animism usually vigorously opposes the possibility of finding in animism notions analogous to the Western differentiation between (something like) a literal and a metaphorical use of personhood (e.g., Harvey 2005, p. 38).

We have already mentioned Wilkinson's and Peterson's criticisms of New Animist retellings: the attributed inclusive use of the notion of 'personhood' may rely on an implicit reshaping of the notion of 'person' according to current Western ideas of what a person is; as a result, saddling Indigenous people with clearly 'absurd statements' such as 'rocks are persons'. Their actual beliefs may be rather far from embracing an "overly literal relational ontology" of "persons" seen everywhere.

Attempts to eschew the presumably typically Western dualism between man and nature and between the literal and the metaphorical seem, in effect, to deny Indigenous peoples of animist tradition the capacity to use their languages in an equally richly layered manner as Westerners do. We revisit a more general version of this problem in Section 6.2.

6.1.2. Is Animism Necessary?

Is animism necessary for a revision of our (Western) relationship with the environment? Here, no detailed discussion seems needed. The whole environmentalist subgenre of New Animist writings is certainly motivated by their identification of Western intellectual tradition as pro-environmentally insufficient. However, the 'Western' view *has* its worthwhile resources. For one thing, Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*, despite being very firmly rooted in the Western philosophical tradition of action-guiding, empiricism-friendly Utilitarianism, put forward in the form of general principles, made a ground-breaking impact on the animal rights movement, along with far-reaching changes in legislation.

More generally, Bernard Williams argues, in a standalone paper (Williams 2017), that the 'anthropocentric' ancestry of environmentalist concerns—the fact that the value we see in non-human nature is inevitably a value intelligible to humans and in human terms—does not make these concerns conditional and conditioned. Concerns of a moral nature—

environmental ethics included—are such that, despite coming to us in *our* language, they would *not be* these concerns if we understood them as conditional and open to pragmatically motivated renegotiations.

Many environmental concerns and environmental philosophies indeed stem from the intellectual milieu of (mildly) alienated, secular modern Westerners. They remain intelligible, legitimate and occasionally even efficient even without attempts at a spiritual transition. Full-blown, articulate and practically engaged environmental concerns can remain—and do remain—intelligible within the present context of Western Modernity. A lot more would be needed to show that pro-environmental concerns and attitudes must remain embryonic, atrophied or underdeveloped unless provided with an animist scaffolding. If there is one saving grace in Western Modernity, it is the fact that its history is also a history of dealing with its recurrent self-loathing. Consider again Wittgenstein's criticisms of Frazer: Wittgenstein's voice is *a* voice of Western Modernity, unhappy with its own tradition, yet not trying to escape it, nor denying 'others' the conceptual resources that one nevertheless appreciates 'at home'.

6.2. Conceptual Gerrymandering Versus Local Efficiency

Our discussion points towards one loophole in the New Animist proposals. Such proposals pin their hopes on 'animism' in the sense of something like a 'properly respectful relationality, appropriately practised, towards the human and the non-human equally'. Such a relationality *is* a worthwhile goal. However, as it is not obvious that all existing animisms represent this goal, it might be better simply to focus on the goal itself and not to complicate the picture with unnecessary references to 'animism', especially if they claim anthropological accuracy.

The other possibility looks like conceptual gerrymandering: we might go along with Harvey and Weber, leave 'spirts' out and *define* 'animism' simply as a carefully curated set of environmentally friendly practices and attitudes. In the end, nothing else would count as animism in the 'right' sense, animism that interests the moral philosopher or activist. In effect, this reverts the direction of the desired inference: from 'animist to pro-environmental' to the other way around. Whatever is properly environmental is thereby 'animist'.[8] Conversely, existing Indigenous adherents of an animist religion are no longer real animists unless they follow the proposed precepts.

This pattern of thinking is familiar from Christian discourse, and certainly also from other religious traditions, such as ones within Islam. In Post-Reformation theology, it became particularly dominant. As Christians, we can never be quite sure that we are *true* Christians. After the Reformation at the latest, it became debatable whether a lukewarm Christian is a Christian at all.[9] Wittgenstein's religious struggles are also connected with such Post-Reformation spirituality.[10] However, it is clear that 'bad' Christians have a definite place in the edifice of faith. The risk of being a bad Christian defines Christianity, not externally, but internally: as soon as you *are* a Christian, you should know that you run the risk of being a *bad* Christian. Bad Christian practices that we now abhor, such as putting heretics to the stake, define our understanding of Christianity by way of contrast. Equally importantly, there is a whole spectrum of options of being less-than-perfect, less-than-devoted Christians even without putting others at stake. Lukewarm, formulaic Christians of convenience may be deemed 'bad' in the sense of not caring constantly about the truth of the Gospels with their whole heart; yet they are an integral part of their Christian communities, and not only as deterring anti-exemplars. (This is perhaps closer to Catholic sensitivities—in some of their forms—than to Protestant ones.)

This invites the question: Are there *bad* animists? Or should we say that those who do not follow (environmentally friendly) animist precepts are no animists at all? Per-

haps the jury is out, at least for those of us who have no comprehensive knowledge of anthropological fieldwork results. Nevertheless, to claim *a priori* that bad (not particularly environmentally friendly, or not particularly observant and respectful) animists are no animists at all amounts to a case of determinism about what it is to have a spiritual tradition. It is to think that your allegiance to a certain form of spiritual tradition defines straightaway how you will think and act. Thus, it means depriving animism of the complexity and richness of practice we freely grant to other spiritual traditions.

In this respect, there is a stark contrast between (environmentalist) philosophical cases in favour of animism, targeting Western audiences, and the localised ways in which particular cases, notions or practices of Indigenous traditions are sometimes utilised in environmental education 'in situ', in the spirit of *reindigenisation*. For instance, Poelina et al. (2022) stress that

> reindigeneization [. . .] is essential to maintain[ing] practices integral to the ecological requirements of their places; a fact unknown or overlooked by Western and institutional forms of power. Decolonisation, therefore, relies upon strengthening of Indigenous realities, rights and languages, for the future of humanity. (p. 398)

The idea here is to connect to local traditions as they are. Distancing oneself from 'Western' ways has a very concrete meaning and a good rationale here, without necessarily implying philosophical ambitions. Similarly, Lewis Williams' (2019) New Zealand-based proposal to draw on Indigenous (Maori) spiritualities and languages points towards decolonising the place and its community. Importantly, what is at issue here is a particular place and the protection of it. The contrast with the 'West' is the contrast between *local* self-management and an imposed rule. Thus, it is not primarily framed in terms of a proper philosophical outlook, but in terms of a *people* finding their proper way to address their situation and their place. Moving away from the subject-object dichotomy towards a sense of an interconnected, alive world is not, in this case, a philosophical programme, but a particular way of building upon Maori spirituality and allowing the community's relation to its place to recover. Notably, though, even in cases such as these, careful, sensitive, and thought-out work with the spiritual resources is needed, in order to build a robust and resilient enough practice.

We thus believe that while mobilising animist spiritualities in environmentalist endeavours is by no means impossible and can be very fruitful, the way to go is not as simple as: "Of course, our eco-Westerners could just go and talk to contemporary Indigenous animists, and ask them how to go about navigating the complexities of environmentalism and modernity. Much easier and more productive than soul-searching about conversion?" (a question asked by one of our anonymous reviewers)—As our presentations of Wittgenstein's and Winch's discussions on cultural understanding should make clear, 'asking' the practitioners and then writing down the answers and heeding them is not as straightforward as one might think. In the re-indigenisation endeavours we just described, 'asking' implies cooperation between groups of people, in search of solutions to problems that were not traditionally present in either of the two cultures. It is a case of both groups seeking to extend their own understanding of things.

At the same time, thoroughgoing changes in environmental attitudes do not simply come in the form of pragmatic solutions. Here, we chime with the New Animists' intuition (albeit not always made explicit) that such changes may indeed require a 'change of heart'. It appears questionable whether such a change can be achieved by making a philosophical case in favour of a particular worldview (or even practice) or by redefining subtly our existing concept. As we tried to indicate, it may be more promising for the change of heart to start from our existing concerns and resources. The question is then how in particular to imagine this change.

7. Conversion from One Religion to Other and Conversion from No Religion

We would like to conclude with a consideration of the nature of the creative self-work involved in successful or promising spiritual transitions, or the forms it can take.

A conversion allows me to see depth in something—or sometimes, to dismantle a 'depth' that I now regard as illusory. Connected with this, Wittgenstein wrote in 1950, presumably with an eye on his cancer diagnosis and his ongoing writing project, the following:

> Someone may for instance say that it is a very grave matter that such & such a person has died before he could complete a certain piece of work; & in another sense that is not what matters. At this point one uses the words in a "deeper sense". (Wittgenstein 1998, p. 97)

However, merely seeing the depth is not enough. In Wittgenstein's case, even what one might consider the minimal move from a nominal Christian to a committed Christian seemed a too long step to take: "I cannot kneel to pray, because it's as though my knees were stiff. I am afraid of dissolution (of my own dissolution) should I become soft" (Wittgenstein 1998, p. 63). The spiritual transition required not only the recognition of spiritual value in the new position but also an act of will, or of overcoming one's previous will. Wittgenstein believed that conversion required him to start a new life, a part of which has to be a "confession" (Wittgenstein 1998, p. 16), which—along with the ensuing change of heart (p. 52)—does not come spontaneously. What supports the exertion of will in the critical moment is the capacity to understand alongside new, or newly rediscovered, lines of urgency.

Evans-Pritchard (after Winch's paper, undeservedly cast as the Rationalist *bête noire* in the philosophy of anthropology[11]) reflected thus on his life in Central Africa:

> I learnt from the African 'primitives' much more than they learnt from me, much that I was never taught at school, something more of courage, endurance, patience, resignation, and forbearance that I had no great understanding of before. Just to give one example: I would say that I learnt more about the nature of God and our human predicament from the Nuer than I ever learnt at home. (Evans-Pritchard 1976, p. 245)

Tove Österman (2007, p. 132), who quotes this passage, points out that Evans-Pritchard entered the Catholic Church after this experience. His transformative experience in Africa led him to see a new kind of depth in concerns (courage, endurance, God, the human condition) that he had already recognised, in a more superficial way, as ones included in his own tradition. His stay in Africa did not make him adopt the local religion, but it led him 'back' to the religion of his cultural background.

Even though monotheistic traditions, especially Christianity, are seen as the chief culprit in establishing an instrumental relationship to non-human nature (e.g., White 1967), Christianity has internal resources for addressing ecology. That is not to say that making ourselves more Christian would be a solution to the eco-crisis, any more than becoming more animist would be. However, environmental concerns, perhaps motivated by the intellectual contexts of secular Western Modernity, perhaps by an encounter with a deep respect for the non-human in a particular animist tradition, may prompt one to *rediscover* resources in Christianity that may feed into environmental concerns in fruitful and illuminating ways. Many intriguing and inspiring works of post-war eco-theology try to map these resources (e.g., Jenkins 2008). Theologians have made the case that the story of Creation gives man, not dominion, but the responsibility to "dress and to keep" the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15; Röcklinsberg 2001). As St Paul suggests, the Fall was a disruption, not only

for humans but for living nature as a whole (Romans 8:19–23). Living beings are united in their fallen state and their longing for redemption.

Neither of these Bible verses may *as such* be a more apt description of the proper relation between the human and the non-human, in comparison with the suggestions of New Animism. But that is not the point. The point is that perhaps more or less *any* spiritual notion or practice that 'goes deep' with a person may do, instead of using environmental concerns as an independent criterion for identifying the kind of spirituality that one *must* embrace.

Not all Christian communities are equally receptive to stewardship theology as opposed to dominionist theology—there are probably differences between North American Evangelicals and South American Liberation Theology or the North European Lutheranism of, say, Röcklinsberg (2001). However, one's spiritual tradition does not dictate one's environment-related agency. This is not a shortcoming. On the contrary, it implies that the practitioners of *any* spiritual tradition are free to use their tradition, often in surprising and imaginative ways, as a stronghold for enacting their environmental concerns.

We can see this as a corrective to Wittgenstein's statement that we cannot choose our ancestors. In some ways, we *can* do exactly that. We can revisit them, and we can activate aspects of the tradition that we have previously overlooked. We can revisit the Christian conception of humanity as guardians of the Creation. We can learn from Modernity's identification of humans as perhaps uniquely self-reflective creatures and see them as unique exactly because they *are* self-reflective. Saying that humans have the concept of a 'guardianship of the Creation' does not mean more than that presumably only humans can make use of this particular resource in their practice.

(Re)creating a viable practice out of 'spiritual resources' is probably easier where we can tap these resources as *spiritual* resources. An alienated secular Modern Westerner may indeed rethink the ideas, notions and practices inherited from the Enlightenment or Christianity (in many different ways, obviously) or—if she is a more whimsical personality—autochthonous Western paganism, whatever that is. But she has little place rethinking animism; meaning *somebody else's* animism. Perhaps, as a plausible roadmap to the 'repurposing' of spiritual traditions to fit pressing environmental concerns: We might start by 'repurposing' our own ancestors, not those of others.

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Notes

[1] Cf. similar observations in the context of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion made by von der Ruhr (1996, sect. II) or Phillips (2004, p. 161f). For a different take on 'Wittgensteinian' views on animals, see Ahlskog and Lagerspetz (2015).

[2] Repurposing: "adapting to our own needs the conceptual, speculative and operational resources used by extra-modern cultures" (Bennett 2021, p. 151).

[3] See e.g., Wittgenstein (1998, p. 84): "Englishwomen for Europeans" stated as an example of how some people's inner lives will always be a mystery to others. Elsewhere, he characterises England as "a country where many masks are worn" (Wittgenstein

1993, p. 27f). While the tone of these observations of England is ambiguous, when it comes to anthropologist J. G. Frazer and his Englishness, Wittgenstein becomes quite openly critical, as we will see.

4 This paradigm centrality of Christianity is complemented in a peculiar manner by Wittgenstein's thoughts about his Jewish family background. He described himself, with some unease, as a "Jewish thinker" (Wittgenstein 1998, p. 16). The theme of this set of remarks from 1931 (pp. 16–19) is the then-popular idea of Jewish "reproductivity", implying that the Jewish genius (including Wittgenstein's own) consists in the talented understanding and *reproduction* of what is best in surrounding cultures. In *Culture and Value*, this strain of thought takes an abrupt end after 1931, perhaps because the rise of the Nazis made the author aware of its sinister implications. See also (Carroll 2014, chap. 2).

5 While Frazer's evolutionism (magic as a pathetic proto- and pseudo-science) is probably beyond salvation, his ascription of belief in various spiritual entities to Indigenous communities is less problematic than it might seem to modern-day advocates of ('New') animism. However, it also appears that Frazer's descriptive method may have been more imaginative and less scientistic than Wittgenstein pictures him; in that sense, it is still an open question what Frazer's accounts of animism have to offer to present-day anthropology. See Willerslev (2011).

6 For a more detailed discussion of this, see Beran (2024). Cf. also Willerslev's (2013) fascinating discussion of actual animists' practices of making fun of the 'spirits'—the reality of spirits needn't entail that they represent a matter of utmost seriousness in the practitioners' lives.

7 "In the case of animistic worldviews, it is especially important to recognize the nuances pertaining to the concept of respect, for a culturally naïve understanding of this concept is apt to miss, for example, the extent to which the *large-scale slaughter of animals* can be, and has been, deemed not merely to be compatible with respect but to feature among its *proper expressions*." (Burley 2019, p. 490; our emphasis)

8 New Animists are occasionally somewhat evasive about what counts as animism. This may have the slightly unfortunate consequence of speaking *in one breath* of new animism, new materialism, ontological turn as well as "other turns", *all* apparently inspired by Indigenous knowledges and practices (Harvey 2023, pp. 74, 82), which, in line of listing all that animism is *not* (p. 84), ends us in a characterisation of animism which is perhaps less provocative and more illuminating than the author wants, indeed rather uninformative: "we have never completely ceased to be animists, always identifying ourselves by our relations and obligations" (p. 81). We are not sure what kind of light this outline sheds on the presumed productivity of the *calls* for *turning to* animism or *learning from* it.

9 Revelation 3:15–16: "I know your works; I know that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth".

10 "The ceremonial (hot or cold) as opposed to the haphazard (lukewarm) is what characterizes piety." (Wittgenstein 2018, p. 40).

11 A better target for Winch's criticism would have been Ernest Gellner. Gellner includes a *critique* of Evans-Pritchard's "[e]xcessive indulgence in contextual charity" in his 1962 essay "Concepts and Society" (reproduced in Gellner 2003, pp. 18–46, see p. 39). Talal Asad (1993) has published a response to Gellner. Their exchange is very interesting, if somewhat outside the scope of our article. According to Gellner, an apparently irrational utterance by members of the target culture can be translated and presented either as 'bad' (irrational, incoherent, false) or as 'good' (rational, coherent, acceptable) depending on how much context the researcher is willing to include. The decision is up to the anthropologist, because "there is nothing in the nature of things or societies to dictate visibly just how much context is relevant to any given utterance, or how that context should be described" (Gellner 2003, p. 31). Gellner criticises Evans-Pritchard (1956) and, in passing, Winch (Gellner 2003, p. 43) for using context purposefully to exclude irrationality in native beliefs. In contrast, Evans-Pritchard does not show the same charity towards colleagues, such as Lévy-Bruhl. Asad (1993) argues, in response, that translation always needs *some* context. The decision how much context to include is not arbitrary, but you find this out through social learning, acquiring skill in your use of the language concerned (Asad 1993, pp. 180, 183). Concepts and uses of words can well be incoherent, conflict-ridden or ambiguous. However, that does not necessarily mean they involve logical mistakes. Evans-Pritchard spends much time on apparent contradictions in Nuer concepts, with the overarching aim of showing the *coherence* in their religious system. Asad points out that the task of the anthropologist, as Evans-Pritchard and others have seen it, is not to pass judgment but consists in cultural translation. Criticism, on the other hand, belongs to the context of a debate (Asad 1993, p. 88). Winch's polemic against Evans-Pritchard perhaps indicates that he, too, assumed that Evans-Pritchard wanted to pass judgment on the rationality of the Azande.—A reviewer for this journal has directed us to this illuminating exchange.

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