

An Animist Manifesto

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All that exists lives
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
Respecting someone is no reason for not eating them

Reasons are best worked out in relationship – especially if you are looking for reasons to eat someone – or if you are looking for reasons not to be eaten

If you agree that all that exists is alive and worthy of respect, it is best to talk about 'persons' or 'people' rather than 'beings' or 'spirits', let alone 'biomechanisms', 'resources', 'possessions', and 'objects'

The world is full of persons (people if you prefer), but few of them are human

The world is full of other-than-human persons
The world is full of other-than-oak persons
The world is full of other-than-hedgehog persons
The world is full of other-than-salmon persons
The world is full of other-than-kingfisher persons
The world is full of other-than-rock persons...

'other-than' has at least three references:

it reminds us that we are persons in relationship with others,
it reminds us that many of our closest kin are human, while the closest kin of oaks are oaks, so we talk most easily with humans while rocks talk most easily with other rocks...
it reminds us to speak first of what we know best (those closest to us)

Make that four references:

it reminds us to celebrate difference as an opportunity to expand our relationships rather than seeing it as a cause of conflict or conquest

All life is relational and we should not collapse our intimate alterities into identities

Others and otherness keep us open to change, open to becoming, never finally fixed in being

Alterities resist entropy and encourage creativity through relationality, sociality (or, as William Blake said, 'enmity is true friendship')

Animism is neither monist nor dualist, it is only just beginning when you get beyond counting one, two... At its best it is thoroughly, gloriously, unashamedly, rampantly pluralist

Respect means being cautious and constructive

It is cautiously approaching others — and our own wishes,

It is constructing relationships, constructing opportunities to talk, to relate, to listen, to spend time in the face-to-face presence and company of others

It is taking care of, caring for, caring about, being careful about...

It can be shown by leaving alone and by giving gifts

believers in 'human rights', for example, demonstrate their belief in rights not only by supporting legislation to protect individuals from states, companies and majorities, but by not insisting on hogging the whole road or pavement, not insisting on another human getting out of the way on a busy street...

You don't have to hug every tree to show them respect but you might have to let trees grow where they will—you might have to move your telephone lines or greenhouse
You might have to build that road away from that rock or that tree

Hugging trees that you don't know may be rude – try introducing yourself first

Just because the world and the cosmos is full of life does not make it a nice and easy place to live. Lots of persons are quite unfriendly to others. Many see us as a good dinner. They might respect us as they eat us. Or they may need education. Like us, they might learn best in relationship with others who show respect even to those they don't like, and especially to those they like the taste of.

Although evolution has no aim, life is not pointless. The purpose of life is to be good people — and good humans or good rocks or good badgers. What we have to find out is what 'good' means where we are, when we are, with whom we are, and so on. It is certainly wrapped up with the word 'respect' and all the acts that implies.

Since all that exists lives—and since all that lives is, in some senses, to some degree, conscious, communicative and relational—and since many of the persons with whom we humans share this planet have a far better idea of what's going on than we do—we can now stop all the silliness about being the pinnacle of creation, the highest achievement of evolution, the self-consciousness of the world or cosmos... We're just part of the whole living community and we've got a lot to learn. Our job isn't to save the planet, or speak for the animals, or evolve towards higher states. Many other-than-human people are already happily self-aware, thank you very much, and if we paid attention we might learn a few things ourselves. By the way, we're probably not alone in mistaking ourselves for the most important people in the world: hedgehogs probably think they are (but they're spiky flea-ridden beasts so why believe them?!).

Um, when I said that 'all that exists lives', I'm not sure about plastic bags. But I am certain that we should not treat objects as mere resources, somehow available or even given to us, or humanity, to use as we will or wish. There is a difference between 'things' and 'objects'. The way we speak is part of the way we treat others. Things can thing with us (that's a cunning if obscure reference to the Saxon word for a council or parliament, a 'thing'). Objects just get looked at, used, throw. Relating with things is different to relating to objects.

By the way, there is no 'away' to throw things to.

Similarly, with words like 'substances', especially those that exist within plant and fungal persons. There are substances, but they aren't ours until they are given, gifted to us. And then we'd better find out why we've been given whatever gifts we get. And we'd better ask how those gifts might be best used (whether it's for pleasure, power, wisdom or whatever). This is especially true if the plant or mushroom person who offers us the gift substance has to lose their life in the process.

Maybe sometimes the mushrooms just want to help us join in the big conversation that's going on all around us. But not all rocks, fish, plants, fungi, birds, animals or humans want to talk with us:

Sometimes they want to be quiet
Sometimes they want to be rude
Sometimes they have other concerns
Sometimes they don't understand
Sometimes we don't speak the language
Sometimes we don't know the appropriate gift

The precise and proper way to show respect depends where you are, who you are, who you are respecting and what they expect. Gifts, like swords and words, have more than one side. Alcohol is a gift in one place, a poison somewhere else. Handshakes are friendly in one place, shows of strength elsewhere. Kissing is respectful to some people, an assault on others. Respectful etiquette is hard work but its reward is fuller participation in a large and exciting community of life.

Sometimes we need shamans to do the talking for us
Sometimes we need shamans to do the talking to us

Animism is just over the bridge that closes the Cartesian gap by knowing how to answer the question, what is your favourite colour? Perhaps it is the bridge. Perhaps there is no gap and animists are people who refuse to collude with the illusion.

Animism is often discovered by sitting beneath trees, on hills, in rivers, with hedgehogs, beside fires... Animism is better communicated in trickster tales, soulful songs, powerful poems, rousing rituals, and/or elemental etiquette than in manifestos.

Notes

1. Open University, U.K.