

Ethnos

ISSN: 0014-1844 (Print) 1469-588X (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/retn20

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**To cite this article:** Tim Ingold (2006) Rethinking the animate, re-animating thought, Ethnos, 71:1, 9-20, DOI: 10.1080/00141840600603111

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/00141840600603111

Published online: 08 Feb 2011.

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# Rethinking the Animate, Re-Animating Thought

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ABSTRACT *Animism is often described as the imputation of life to inert objects. Such imputation is more typical of people in western societies who dream of finding life on other planets than of indigenous peoples to whom the label of animism has classically been applied. These peoples are united not in their beliefs but in a way of being that is alive and open to a world in continuous birth. In this animic ontology, beings do not propel themselves across a ready-made world but rather issue forth through a world-in-formation, along the lines of their relationships. To its inhabitants this weather-world, embracing both sky and earth, is a source of astonishment but not surprise. Re-animating the 'western' tradition of thought means recovering the sense of astonishment banished from official science.*

KEYWORDS *Animism, relational ontology, movement, weather-world, science*

Every so often the media of the western world register a surge of excitement about the imminent prospect of discovering life on the planet Mars. So potent is this expectation that world leaders – albeit of questionable intellectual stature – have been known to stake their reputations upon the promise of its fulfilment. Wily astronomers, beleaguered by chronic lack of funding for their most expensive science, are well aware of the importance of keeping the sense of excitement on the boil. So long as politicians see in it a chance of securing their place in history, they know that the money will keep coming in. For the rest of us, perhaps naively but also less cynically, the thought of life on another planet exerts an enduring fascination. I, too, am fascinated by the idea. I am at a loss to know, however, what it is exactly that scientists hope or expect to find on the surface of the planet. Is life the kind of thing that might be left lying about in the Martian landscape? If so, how would we recognise it when we see it? Perhaps the answer might be that

ETHNOS, VOL. 71:1, MARCH 2006 (PP. 9–20)
© Routledge Journals, Taylor and Francis, on behalf of the Museum of Ethnography
ISSN 0014-1844 PRINT/ISSN 1469-588X ONLINE. DOI: 10.1080/00141840600603111

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we would identify life on Mars in just the same way that we would identify it on our own Earth. But I am not even sure how we would do that. What I *am* sure about, because we know it from ethnography, is that people do not always agree about what is alive and what is not, and that even when they *do* agree it might be for entirely different reasons. I am also sure, again because we know it from ethnography, that people do not universally discriminate between the categories of living and non-living things. This is because for many people, life is not an attribute of things at all. That is to say, it does not emanate from a world that already exists, populated by objects-as-such, but is rather immanent in the very process of that world's continual generation or coming-into-being.

People who have such an understanding of life – and they include many among whom anthropologists have worked, in regions as diverse as Amazonia, Southeast Asia and the circumpolar North – are often described in the literature as animists. According to a long established convention, animism is a system of beliefs that imputes life or spirit to things that are truly inert. But this convention, as I shall show, is misleading on two counts. First, we are dealing here not with a way of believing *about* the world but with a condition of being *in* it. This could be described as a condition of being alive to the world, characterised by a heightened sensitivity and responsiveness, in perception and action, to an environment that is always in flux, never the same from one moment to the next. Animacy, then, is not a property of persons imaginatively projected onto the things with which they perceive themselves to be surrounded. Rather – and this is my second point – it is the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence. The animacy of the lifeworld, in short, is not the result of an infusion of spirit into substance, or of agency into materiality, but is rather ontologically prior to their differentiation.

I am surely not the first to observe that the real animists, according to the conventional definition of the term, are precisely those who dream of finding life on Mars. They truly believe that there exists an animating principle that may be lodged in the interior of physical objects, causing them to go forth and multiply. It was this same belief that ethnologists of the nineteenth century projected onto the savages of their acquaintance, accusing them nevertheless of applying it far too liberally to cover anything and everything, whether actually alive or not. We should not therefore be surprised by the parallel between the astronomers of the early twenty-first century, who



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hope to discover life lurking within the matter of other planets, and their ethnological predecessors who set out to discover animistic beliefs lurking within the minds of other cultures. Psychologists have suggested that such beliefs are founded upon the bedrock of an unconscious predisposition that even 'educated adults' share with children and supposedly primitive folk – a predisposition to act as though inanimate objects are actually alive (Brown & Thouless 1965). The argument goes that if you don't know whether something is alive or not, it is a better bet to assume that it is, and reckon with the consequences. The costs of getting it wrong in some instances are outweighed by the benefits of getting it right in others (Guthrie 1993:41). Thus we have all evolved to be closet animists without of course realising it. Intuitive non-animists have been selected out, due to unfortunate encounters with things that turned out to be more alive than anticipated.

## Continuous Birth

Such nonsense aside, arguments of this general form follow the same logic. I call it the logic of inversion, and it is deeply sedimented within the canons of western thought (Ingold 1993:218–19). Through inversion, the field of involvement in the world, of a thing or person, is converted into an interior schema of which its manifest appearance and behaviour are but outward expressions. Thus the organism, moving and growing along lines that bind it into the web of life, is reconfigured as the outward expression of an inner design. Conventionally identified as the *genotype*, this design is held to underwrite the manifest form of the *phenotype*. Likewise the person, acting and perceiving within a nexus of intertwined relationships, is presumed to behave according to the directions of cultural models or cognitive schemata installed inside his or her head. Through inversion, beings originally open to the world are closed in upon themselves, sealed by an outer boundary or shell that protects their inner constitution from the traffic of interactions with their surroundings. My aim is to reverse this logic. Life having been turned, as it were, 'outside in', I now want to turn it inside out again in order to recover that original openness to the world in which the people whom *we* (that is, western-trained ethnologists) call animist find the meaning of life.

One man from among the Wemindji Cree, native hunters of northern Canada, offered the following meaning to the ethnographer Colin Scott. Life, he said, is 'continuous birth' (Scott 1989:195). I want to nail that to my door! It goes to the heart of the matter. To elaborate: life in the animic ontology is not an emanation but a generation of being, in a world that is

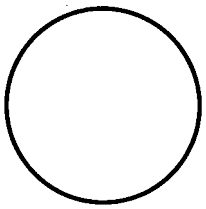


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not pre-ordained but incipient, forever on the verge of the actual (Ingold 2000:113). One is continually present as witness to that moment, always moving like the crest of a wave, at which the world is about to disclose itself for what it is. In his essay 'Eye and Mind' the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty attributed precisely the same kind of sensibility – the same openness to a world-in-formation – to the painter. The painter's relation to the world, Merleau-Ponty writes, is not a simple 'physical-optical' one. That is, he does not gaze upon a world that is finite and complete, and proceed to fashion a representation of it. Rather, the relation is one of 'continued birth'– these are Merleau-Ponty's very words – as though at every moment the painter opened his eyes to the world for the first time. His vision is not of things in a world, but of things becoming things, and of the world becoming a world (Merleau-Ponty 1964:167–68, 181). The painter Paul Klee made much the same point in his *Creative Credo* of 1920. Art, he famously declared, 'does not reproduce the visible but makes visible' (Klee 1961:76).

## The Relational Constitution of Being

I want to stress two points about this animic perception of the world. One concerns the relational constitution of being, the other concerns the primacy of movement. I shall deal with each in turn. The first point takes me back to the logic of inversion. Let us imagine an organism or a person. I might depict it like this:



But in this apparently innocent depiction I have already effected an inversion. I have folded the organism in on itself such that it is delineated and contained within a perimeter boundary, set off against a surrounding world – an environment – with which it is destined to interact according to its nature. The organism is 'in here', the environment 'out there'. But instead of drawing a circle, I might just as well have drawn a line. So let us start again. Here is an organism:

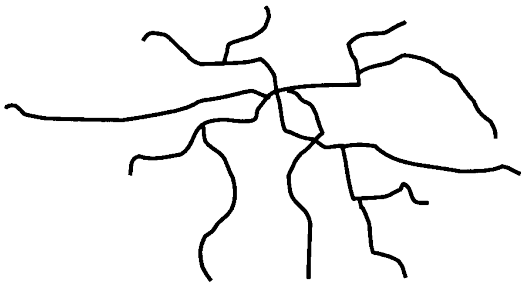




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In this depiction there is no inside or outside, and no boundary separating the two domains. Rather there is a trail of movement or growth. Every such trail traces a relation. But the relation is not *between* one thing and another – between the organism 'here' and the environment 'there'. It is rather a trail *along* which life is lived: one strand in a tissue of trails that together make up the texture of the lifeworld. That texture is what I mean when I speak of organisms being constituted within a relational field. It is a field not of interconnected points but of interwoven lines, not a network but a *meshwork*.

Nevertheless the depiction of the single line is of course a simplification. For the lives of organisms generally extend along not one but multiple trails, branching out from a source. We should imagine the organism, then, not as a self-contained object like a ball that can propel itself from place to place, but as an ever ramifying web of lines of growth. The philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1983) famously likened this web to a rhizome, though I prefer the image of the fungal mycelium (Ingold 2003:302–6). Whatever metaphor we choose, the organism now looks something like this:



It goes without saying that this depiction would do just as well for persons who, being organisms, likewise extend along the multiple pathways of their involvement in the world.

But what, now, has happened to the environment? It cannot be what literally *surrounds* the organism or person, since you cannot surround a web without drawing a line around it. And that would immediately be to effect an inversion, converting those relations along which the organism-person lives its life in the world into internal properties of which its life is but the outward expression. We can imagine, however, that lines of growth issuing from multiple sources become comprehensively entangled with one another, rather like the vines and creepers of a dense patch of tropical forest, or the



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tangled root systems that you cut through with your spade every time you dig the garden. What we have been accustomed to calling 'the environment' might, then, be better envisaged as a domain of entanglement. It is within such a tangle of interlaced trails, continually ravelling here and unravelling there, that beings grow or 'issue forth' along the lines of their relationships (Ingold 2003:305–6).

This tangle is the texture of the world. In the animic ontology, beings do not simply occupy the world, they *inhabit* it, and in so doing – in threading their own paths through the meshwork – they contribute to its ever-evolving weave. Thus we must cease regarding the world as an inert substratum, over which living things propel themselves about like counters on a board or actors on a stage, where artefacts and the landscape take the place, respectively, of properties and scenery. By the same token, beings that inhabit the world (or that are truly indigenous in this sense) are not objects that move, undergoing displacement from point to point across the world's surface. Indeed the inhabited world, as such, has no surface. Whatever surfaces one encounters, whether of the ground, water, vegetation or buildings, are *in* the world, not *of* it (Ingold 2000:241). And woven into their very texture are the lines of growth and movement of its inhabitants. Every such line, in short, is a way *through* rather than *across*. And it is as their lines of movement, not as mobile, self-propelled entities, that beings are instantiated in the world. This brings me to my second point, about the primacy of movement.

## The Primacy of Movement

The animic world is in perpetual flux, as the beings that participate in it go their various ways. These beings do not exist at locations, they occur along paths. Among the Inuit of the Canadian Arctic, for example, as the writer Rudy Wiebe has shown (1989:15), as soon as a person moves he or she becomes a line. People are known and recognised by the trails they leave behind them. Animals, likewise, are distinguished by characteristic patterns of activity or movement signatures, and to perceive an animal is to witness this activity going on, or to hear it. Thus, to take a couple of examples from Richard Nelson's wonderful account of the Koyukon of Alaska, *Make Prayers to the Raven*, you see 'streaking like a flash of fire through the undergrowth', not a fox, and 'perching in the lower branches of spruce trees', not an owl (Nelson 1983:108, 158). The names of animals are not nouns but verbs.

But it is no different with celestial bodies, such as the sun and the moon. We might think of the sun as a giant disk that is observed to make its way



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from east to west across the great dome of the sky. It could be depicted like this:



But in the pictographic inscriptions of native peoples of the North American Plains, it is depicted like this:



or this:



where the little nick at the end of the line indicates sunrise or sunset (Farnell 1994:959). In these depictions the sun is not understood as an object that moves *across* the sky. Rather it is identified as the path of its movement *through* the sky, on its daily journey from the eastern to the western horizon. Just how we are to imagine the sky, and in particular the relation between sky and earth, is a problem to which I shall return below.

Wherever there is life there is movement. Not all movement, however, betokens life. The movement of life is specifically of becoming rather than being, of renewal along a path rather than displacement in space. Every creature, as it 'issues forth' and trails behind, moves in its characteristic way. The sun is alive because of the way it moves through the firmament, but so too are the trees because of the particular ways their boughs sway or their leaves flutter in the wind, and because of the sounds they make in doing so. Of course the western scientist would agree that the tree is alive, even though he might have doubts about the sun. But his reasons would be quite different. The tree is alive, he would say, not because of its movement but because it is a cellular organism whose growth is fuelled by photosynthetic reactions and regulated by DNA in the cell nucleus. As for its movements, these are just effects of the wind. But what of the wind itself? Again, the



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scientist would have his own explanations: the wind is caused by horizontal and vertical differences in atmospheric air pressure. It, too, is an effect. In most animic cosmologies, however, the winds are taken to be alive and to have agentive powers of their own; in many they are important persons that give shape and direction to the world in which people live, just as do the sun, the moon and the stars.

Once we recognise the primacy of movement in the animic cosmos, the inclusion in the pantheon of beings of what modern science would classify as meteorological phenomena – not just the winds but commonly also thunder – becomes readily comprehensible. We are not required to believe that the wind is a being that blows, or that thunder is a being that claps. Rather the wind *is* blowing, and the thunder *is* clapping, just as organisms and persons *are* living in the ways peculiar to each. But I think there is rather more to be said about the prominence accorded to these weather-related manifestations of being, and this brings me back to the relation between earth and sky.

## Sky, Earth and the Weather

I mentioned earlier our propensity to suppose that the inanimate world is presented to life as a surface to be occupied. Life, we say, is lived on the ground, anchored to solid foundations, while the weather swirls about overhead. Beneath this ground surface lies the earth; above it the atmosphere. As solid *substance*, the earth provides support for life activities and materials for subsistence; as a gaseous *medium*, the air affords both mobility and sensory perception, and of course allows terrestrial animals to breathe (Gibson 1979: 16–22). In the pronouncements of many theorists, however, the ground figures as an interface not merely between medium and substance, but much more fundamentally between the domains of *agency* and *materiality*. And this has the very peculiar consequence of rendering immaterial the medium through which organisms and persons move in the conduct of their activities. What happens then to the wind and rain, to sunshine and clouds, to frost and falling snow, to thunder and lightning?

The equation of materiality with the solid substance of the earth creates the impression that life goes on upon the outer surface of a world that has already congealed into its final form, rather than in the midst of a world of perpetual flux. Between mind and nature, persons and things, and agency and materiality, there is no conceptual space for those very real phenomena and transformations of the medium that generally go by the name of weather. This accounts for the virtual absence of weather from philosophical debates



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on these matters. It is a result of the logic of inversion – a logic that places occupation before habitation, movement across before movement through, surface before medium. In the terms of this logic, the weather is simply unthinkable. In the animic ontology, by contrast, what is unthinkable is the very idea that life is played out upon the inanimate surface of a ready-made world. Since living beings, according to this ontology, make their way *through* a nascent world rather than *across* its pre-formed surface, the properties of the medium through which they move are all-important. That is why the inhabited world is constituted in the first place by the aerial flux of weather rather than by the grounded fixities of landscape. The weather is dynamic, always unfolding, ever changing in its moods, currents, qualities of light and shade, colours, alternately damp or dry, warm or cold, and so on. In this world the earth, far from providing a solid foundation for existence, appears to float like a fragile and ephemeral raft, woven from the strands of terrestrial life, and suspended in the great sphere of the sky. This sphere is where all the lofty action is: where the sun shines, the winds blow, the snow falls and storms rage. It is a sphere in which powerful persons seek not to stamp their will upon the earth but to take flight with the birds, soar with the wind, and converse with the stars. Their ambitions, we could say, are more celestial than territorial.

This is the point at which to return to the question I posed a moment ago, of the meaning of the sky, and of its relation to the earth. Consider the definition offered by my Chambers dictionary. The sky, the dictionary informs us, is 'the apparent canopy over our heads'. This is revealing in two respects. First, the sky is imagined as a *surface*, just like the surface of the earth except, of course, a covering overhead rather than a platform underfoot. Secondly however, unlike the earth's surface, that of the sky is not real but only *apparent*. In reality there is no surface at all. Conceived as such, the sky is a phantasm. It is where angels tread. Following what is by now a familiar line of thought, the surface of the earth has become an interface between the concrete and the imaginary. What lies below (the earth) belongs to the physical world, whereas what arches above (the sky) is sublimated into thought. With their feet on the ground and their heads in the air, human beings appear to be constitutionally split between the material and the mental. Within the animic cosmos, however, the sky is not a surface, real or imaginary, but a medium. Moreover this medium, as we have seen, is inhabited by a variety of beings, including the sun and the moon, the winds, thunder, birds, and so on. These beings lay their own trails through the sky, just as terrestrial beings lay their



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trails through the earth. The example of the sun's path has already been mentioned. But the winds, too, are commonly supposed to make tracks through the sky, coming from the quarters where they reside (Farnell 1994: 943). Nor are the earth and the sky mutually exclusive domains of habitation. Birds routinely move from one domain to the other, as do powerful humans such as shamans. The Yup'ik Eskimos, according to Anne Fienup-Riordan (1994: 80), recognise a class of extraordinary persons who are so fleet of foot that they can literally take off, leaving a trail of wind-blown snow in the trees.

## Astonishment and Surprise

In short, far from facing each other on either side of an impenetrable division between the real and the immaterial, earth and sky are inextricably linked within one indivisible field, integrated along the tangled life-lines of its inhabitants. Painters know this. They know that to paint what is conventionally called a 'landscape' is to paint both earth and sky, and that earth and sky blend in the perception of a world undergoing continuous birth. They know, too, that the visual perception of this earth-sky, unlike that of objects in the landscape, is in the first place an experience of light. In their painting they aim to recover, behind the mundane ordinariness of the ability to see *things*, the sheer astonishment of that experience, namely, of being able to *see*. This is what Merleau-Ponty (1964: 166) calls the magic or delirium of vision. Astonishment, I think, is the other side of the coin to the very *openness* to the world that I have shown to be fundamental to the animic way of being. It is the sense of wonder that comes from riding the crest of the world's continued birth. Yet along with openness comes vulnerability. To outsiders unfamiliar with this way of being, it often looks like timidity or weakness, proof of a lack of rigour characteristic of supposedly primitive belief and practice. The way to know the world, they say, is not to open oneself up to it, but rather to 'grasp' it within a grid of concepts and categories. Astonishment has been banished from the protocols of conceptually driven, rational inquiry. It is inimical to science.

Seeking closure rather than openness, scientists are often surprised by what they find, but never astonished. Scientists are surprised when their predictions turn out to be wrong. The very goal of prediction, however, rests upon the conceit that the world can be held to account. But of course the world goes its own way, regardless. What the designer Stanley Brand says about architectural constructions applies equally to the constructions of science: 'All buildings are predictions; all predictions are wrong' (1994: 178). Following



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the Popperian programme of conjecture and refutation, science has turned surprise into a principle of creative advance, converting its cumulative record of predictive failure into a history of progress. Surprise, however, exists only for those who have forgotten how to be astonished at the birth of the world, who have grown so accustomed to control and predictability that they depend on the unexpected to assure them that events are taking place and that history is being made. By contrast, those who are truly open to the world, though perpetually astonished, are never surprised. If this attitude of unsurprised astonishment leaves them vulnerable, it is also a source of strength, resilience and wisdom. For rather than waiting for the unexpected to occur, and being caught out in consequence, it allows them at every moment to respond to the flux of the world with care, judgement and sensitivity.

Are animism and science therefore irreconcilable? Is an animistic openness to the world the enemy of science? Certainly not. I would not want my remarks to be interpreted as an attack on the whole scientific enterprise. But science as it stands rests upon an impossible foundation, for in order to turn the world into an *object* of concern, it has to place itself above and beyond the very world it claims to understand. The conditions that enable scientists to *know*, at least according to official protocols, are such as to make it impossible for scientists to *be* in the very world of which they seek knowledge. Yet all science depends on observation, and all observation depends on participation – that is, on a close coupling, in perception and action, between the observer and those aspects of the world that are the focus of attention. If science is to be a coherent knowledge practice, it must be rebuilt on the foundation of openness rather than closure, engagement rather than detachment. And this means regaining the sense of astonishment that is so conspicuous by its absence from contemporary scientific work. Knowing must be reconnected with being, epistemology with ontology, thought with life. Thus has our rethinking of indigenous animism led us to propose the re-animation of our own, so-called 'western' tradition of thought.

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