Animist Contributions to Rethinking Wellbeing and Healing[1]

Keynote

GRAHAM HARVEY

Introduction

Animism has been the subject of considerable debate in recent decades. The term was once used almost entirely to denigrate those it purported to label but has now been reassessed, reclaimed, revalued and re-used. Instead of alleging, as some scholars have (*e.g.* TYLOR 1891), that animists are people who mistakenly attribute life, spirit, soul, mind, agency or intentionality to non-human beings, recent conversations have proposed more interesting and more provocative analyses. Elsewhere I have summarised the new use of the term 'animism' as follows:

> "Animists are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others. Animism is lived out in various ways that are all about learning to act respectfully (carefully and constructively) towards and among other persons. Persons are beings, rather than objects, who are animated and social towards others (even if they are not always sociable). Animism may involve learning how to recognise who is a person and what is not—because it is not always obvious and not all animists agree that everything that exists is alive or personal. However, animism is more accurately understood as being concerned with learning how to be a good person in respectful relationships with other persons" (HARVEY 2017a: xvii).

In this essay, I pick up the thread of the last sentence of that summary and trace ways in which animism contributes to rethinking wellbeing and healing by engaging with views of what a "good life" might be. I argue that different notions of health, wellbeing, good living and, therefore, different therapeutic practices arise from particular understandings of what a person is, should be, or might become. I contrast animist relational approaches with the individualising project of Modernity (by which I refer not to an epoch but to a political-cultural project that began in Europe and is now globally dominant, albeit in diverse forms).[2]

Important as it is to understand the people and practices which could be labelled "animistic," recent animism discussions take place in a wider context. For one thing, a significant proportion of people who express preferences for "spirituality" over "religion" refer to or draw on at least aspects of the worldviews or lifeways of Indigenous people (particularly Native Americans, Amazonians and/or Siberians) some of whom might be considered to be animists. They exemplify a trend in which Indigenous knowledges sometimes provide new inspiration or provocation for reflecting on the accepted norms and practices of globalised "Western" culture. This trend is one justification for the practice of anthropology and ethnological disciplines. As HOWARD EILBERG-SCHWARTZ asserted

> "[A]nthropology has insisted that we have a great deal to learn about ourselves from the study of the other [...]. This is the myth that justifies the anthropological enterprise, a myth that says that the study of the other leads to enlightenment" (*ibid.* 1989: 87).

Put more colloquially, learning from others (whoever they and we are) is the only excuse for poking our (scholarly or spiritual) noses into their business. Tensions between respectful learning, critical questioning and appropriation are entangled in this and other considerations of and debates about diverse knowledges and practices.

"Learning from others" is also a necessary corollary of recognising the expertise of our hosts

(HARVEY 2003, 2005, 2013, 2017b). Doing so with respect makes a significant difference to both spiritual and scholarly endeavours. The key point is that learning among others ought to open us to the possibility that our current ideas and practices, cultures and norms, could require alteration. If, as BRUNO LATOUR (1993) has declared, "we have never been modern," perhaps we have been animists or, at least, might come to understand the necessity and value of more carefully thinking about such matters. For these reasons, this article brings animist and Modernist notions of personhood and wellbeing into dialogue. This includes an outline of some of the resonances of the *Anishinaabe* term "bimaadiziwin" which could be translated as "good life" or "living well," or both. The dialogue between animist and Modernist ontologies continues by considering a contrast between therapeutic practices that might be called shamanry and (neo-)shamanism. This is possible (and hopefully productive) because the cosmologies and practices of some Indigenous shamans have influenced some Western spiritualities and/or therapies. The article concludes that the relationality of animism and the consumerist individualism of Modernism involve contrasting notions of "good living" and of health practices.

Persons, Individuals and Dividuals

Recent animism debates (and those related to "new materialism" and the "ontological turn") constellate around the question of what it means to be a person and frequently cite IRVING HALLOWELL's *Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View* (1960). In this and other publications, HALLOWELL clearly sets out much of what he learnt among his *Anishinaabe* (also *Ojibwa*)[3] hosts near the Berens River in what is now Manitoba, Canada. He argues that

> "While in all cultures 'persons' comprise one of the major classes of objects to which the self [*i.e.* a particular person, not the 'ego in the psychoanalytic sense'] must become oriented, this category of being is by no means limited to human beings. In Western culture, as in others, 'supernatural' beings are recognized as 'persons,' although belonging, at the same time, to an other than human category. But in the social sciences and psychology, 'persons' and human beings are categorically identified. [...] Yet this obviously involves a radical abstraction if, from the standpoint of the people being studied, the concept of 'person' is not, in fact, synonymous with human being but transcends it. [...] The significance of these differences in perspective may be illustrated in the case of the Ojibwa by the manner in which the kinship term 'grandfather' is used. [...] [If] we study Ojibwa social organization in the usual manner [i.e. treating 'persons' as a synonym of 'humans'], we take account of only one set of 'grandfathers.' When we study their religion we discover other 'grandfathers.' But if we adopt a world view perspective no dichotomization appears. In this perspective 'grandfather' is a term applicable to certain 'person objects,' without any distinction between human persons and those of an other-than-human class. Furthermore, both sets of grandfathers can be said to be functionally as well as terminologically equivalent in certain respects. The other-than-human grandfathers are sources of power to human beings through the 'blessings' they bestow, *i.e.*, a sharing of their power which enhances the 'power' of human beings." (HALLOWELL 1960: 21f)

A number of matters are established here. Humans are not the only kind of persons. Persons are ontologically relational beings. Some persons are closer kin than others. Persons have varying degrees of 'power' (and different *kinds* of power, some of which might be called authority, prestige, dominance, ability or skill). In the fuller discussion, HALLOWELL also shows that from a Western perspective some of the "other-than-human" class of person might be considered "supernatural" while some might be considered "natural-" However, he clearly explains that these categories do not serve well to translate or convey the sense of *Anishinaabe* knowledge. So, for example, when HALLOWELL asked KIIWIICH (ALEC KEEPER), an elder and ritual leader, whether some nearby stones were alive, a discussion ensued (one that has generated considerable discussion about animacy and relationality in recent years). The relevant point for the present is that, as *Kiiwiich* understood and experienced the world, both humans and stones have the potential to act towards other beings – for example, giving and receiving gifts. Such relational engagements, rather than any sense of having a soul (or mind, ego or other kind of interiority), make them "persons." In terms of linguistic categories, stones are "per-

sons" and "other-than-human persons"—just as humans are "persons" and "other-than-stone persons"—but they are neither "natural" nor "supernatural" in any meaningful sense. In life, relational interactions are not best fixed into categories and "personhood" is recognisable as beings give and receive gifts and other concretisations of respect (Bird-David & Naveh 2008; cf. Bird-David 2018).

Beyond noting that there are many kinds of person, most of whom are not human, but all of whom show themselves to be persons when they act relationally with others, Hallowell and *Kiiwiich*'s conversation anticipated other challenges to the terminology of personhood (in the English language at least). In particular, our understanding of what it might mean to be a person can be expanded by considering the notion of *dividual* relationality. The term "dividual" originated with McKim Marriot's (1976) discussion of "diversity without dualism" among Indian Hindus, and with Marilyn Strathern's (1988) contrast between the ambitions of Melanesians and "Westerners" to grow different kinds of person and to assemble communities differently. It is important to note that in their individual/dividual contrast, both Marriot and Strathern were deploying ideal types. They recognised that in lived reality both conceptions of personhood are evident everywhere, existing on a continuum or emerging in tension. Similarly, in this article, "Modernity," "Indigeneity," "animist," "individual," and "dividual" are employed for strategic purposes. Reality is too messy, diverse, changeable and interesting to be pinned down by strict contrasts or enclosed in the tight boxes such labels might suggest. Playing in the space between ideal types and lived realities is, however, valuable in seeking to understand the priorities, obligations, and ambitions that inform and shape cultural lives. The following paragraphs briefly outline some ideas about individuals and dividuals.

As summed up by Bruno Latour's assertion that "We have never been modern" (1993; cf. Latour 2013), the project of Modernity attempts to separate humans from the larger world, for example by persuading us that culture and nature label discrete realities. In terms of what "person" might mean, this Modernism has emphasised individuality and interiority as it encourages each "person" to imagine they have a unique (self-)identity. In the realm of politics and citizenship, the Modernist process of organising Nation States according to Westphalian system principles required the curtailment of trans-national loyalties (*e.g.* loyalties to Roman Catholic or Protestant princes) (Cavanaugh 1995, 2009). Persons-as-citizens were and are expected to demonstrate loyalty as *individual* voters in Nation States, neither constrained nor compelled by other kinds of relationship. Being cousins, chefs, drivers, pet-owners, club-members, bloggers and other kinds of kin is not negated by the requirements of citizenship, but is seen as different, other-than-political ways in which each putatively bounded and discrete self relates to other individuals. In the realm of religion, the interior faith of individual believers was emphasised above participation in rituals. While this began among Protestant Christians, it was soon pursued by Catholic Christians and eventually spread globally as a plank of Modernity's ideology and sociality. Eventually, "spirituality" has become separated from the institutions and communities that are often taken to define "religion." It emphasises intuition and intention. In the realm of therapy, Modernity's "individuation" also entails an inward focus. Sociologically, as Arnar Árnason points out, the Modern assumption is that "social relations exist between points, or roles, in a structure, or at best *between* the people temporarily occupying these positions" (*ibid.* 2012: 68, original emphasis).[4] Some philosophers have followed Descartes in separating mind from matter, and constructed ontologies in which mindful humans privilege rationality over sensuality in their engagements with the "nonhuman" world. In all these ways, a Modern person is an individual, a discrete object or actor even when interacting with others.

Dividual personhood is conceived differently. Persons are not points or positions in a structure but relations. Beings become persons precisely by engaging and interacting with others. Personhood is not a matter of identity but of interacting, doing or performing. A person is recognised in the performance of relationality with and among others. Because some relations are closer than others, kinship and locality-rooted relations are often crucial to the interactions and performances which form and reform Indigenous communities.

The sensual physicality of dividual persons is integral to the ways in which they engage with others. Knowledge is to be gained not just from self-reflection but from trusting the bodily and worldly sensorium and from learning to pay attention to particular experiences with(in) the world-as-community. (For insightful and provocative consideration of ontologies arising from relationality and sensual embodiment cf. Abram 1996, 2010; Viveiros de Castro 1992, 1998, 2004, 2007). If Modernity might interpret the ancient advice "know thyself" as "look inward" or "honour your individuality," in cultures or communities which encourage dividual personhood it might mean "relate to others with respect" or "honour your responsibilities to others."

Animist Wellbeing

This sketch of what it can mean to be a person in Modernist and animist communities inevitably leads to the question of what a healthy person might be. This section considers wellbeing among animistic, relational *Anishinaabeg*. I engage with *Anishinaabe* animism because of the foundational role of Hallowell's publications in "new animism" debate, because I have benefitted from the hospitality of *Anishinaabe* hosts, and particularly because of the clarity of an *Anishinaabe* colleague, Larry Gross, whose work informs this section. Gross's book, *Anishinaabe Ways of Knowing and Being* (2014), is particularly important because it not only celebrates Indigenous cultural resilience but also engages robustly with the traumas that are its context.

Gross demonstrates that the term *bimaadiziwin* encapsulates the moral structure and religious lives of *Anishinaabe* people. He notes that although the word might be translated simply as "life" (requiring a prefix *mino-* to indicate "a good life"), in many contexts *bimaadiziwin* is commonly used to mean "a good life" or "living well." Gross says that this "can basically be described as a long and healthy life" (Gross 2014: 205). It is learnt about in "a lifelong process that includes every part of the culture" (*ibid.* 208) rather than being taught as a body of facts and rules. Observation of the lives of elders and of the larger-than-human community, the telling and hearing of stories, and the repeated casual, conversational and ritual evocation of respect provide some indicators of what it could mean to live well. Of the contexts discussed by Gross in which *bimaadiziwin* is taught and learnt, three can be usefully summarised here: silence in the woods, hunting and fasting.

At the heart of Gross' chapter on "silence and the *Anishinaabe* worldview" is a story about grandparents instructing their grandchildren to be "quiet in the woods because this is the deer's house and we are just visitors" (*ibid.* 2014: 61, citing Northrup 2001: 18). The instruction is given as the family group leave to go into the woods to tap maple trees for the sap from which to make syrup. Arriving in the woods, the children run around, laughing, boisterously competing to collect the most sap. Nonetheless, this is recorded as "a good learning season" because, as Gross comments, the lesson has been imparted and "will eventually find its way into the children's consciousness" (Gross 2014: 62). They will adopt the practice of being silent or quiet in the woods. It will become a life- and personality-shaping habit. They will listen to the larger-than-human community getting on with life. They will become aware of their own presence in that community. They will come to know what sounds, sights and other sensual experiences are communicative, beneficial or threatening. They will appreciate the value of showing respect in the domain of other persons' homes.

Hunting has been and remains a significant part of traditional *Anishinaabe* life. It is framed and shaped by protocols and taboos arising from the understanding that humans and animals have significant relationships—their shared belonging to places composes ecologies of "at home-ness" with kin and generates mutual obligations. This understanding is made stronger by the totemism in which human groups associate together as the relations of specific species (*i.e.* in bear or otter clans—the *Anishinaabe* word *totem* or *dodem* meaning "clan," a larger-than-family inter-species assemblage). Hunting requires specific ways of conducting respect and enacting responsibilities. Gross mentions some of them, including that "one was not to speak ill of animals. Also, dead game animals were to be treated as honoured guests" (*ibid.* 209). Disrespecting prey ani-

mals is, in many animist cultures, one of the main reasons for the employment of shamans (ritualists focused on in the following section). Respecting animals (and other food-persons) and abiding by pragmatic and time-tested hunting practices maintains healthy ecologies, communities, bodies and other relations.

As GROSS says, "while ostensibly fasting was traditionally a search to 'know thyself,' more comprehensively speaking, fasting also brought an individual into a lifelong moral compact" with persons able to provide assistance throughout life (*ibid.* 208). Such persons could include songs because these are understood to be "living persons." They can be received during fasts and come to help in healing other people, but "one would also have to work with the song or the [other-than-human] helper who gave one the song [...] [which would] most likely entail following certain modes of behaviour [which] had their moral aspects" (*ibid.*). These behaviours are particularly important because, as GROSS sets out in detail, songs are living, animate persons, with "the power to affect other things," who must be fully present along with the singer/healer and the patient for there to be a cure (*ibid.* 105ff). Healers work with songs (or song-persons) to cure patients. As in other relationships, but especially in those of great intimacy or significance, appropriate behavioural etiquette is to be expected.

In all three examples—silence, hunting and fasting—*Anishinaabeg* emphasise sensual, physical practices as ways of creating, maintaining, or restoring relationships between humans and the larger-than-human community. The good life is respectful and entails reciprocity and responsibility. It is rewarded with further opportunities to relate well. But lives in a multi-species world can be fraught with difficulties which sometimes require the intervention of healers and, in animist communities, sometimes of shamans.

Shamanry vs Shamanism

The term "shaman" has become immensely popular far beyond its Siberian homeland. "Shamanism" is now commonly associated with *Altered States of Consciousness* (ASC) to the degree that such states seem to define the phenomena. Workshops and *Do It Yourself* style publications encourage people to undertake "shamanic journeys" to re-connect with their inner selves and the symbolic "power animals" who might aid their individuation. Some such people go on to offer therapeutic support for other Modern individuals, usually in the form of further guided visualisations that fuse Jungian-style therapy with forms of "spirituality" (another term, like "shamanism," of such wide application it can be hard to know if it has any specific meaning). The activities and aesthetics of these practices have been widely debated by scholars in multiple disciplines, generating a large literature alongside that of practitioners (some of which is surveyed in HARVEY & WALLIS 2016.)

To distinguish "shamanism" (sometimes "neo-shamanism") from the more animistic practices of Indigenous peoples, I propose to use the term "shamanry." This has the added advantages of resisting the systematisation suggested by "-ism" and of emphasising practice over ideology. According to the *Yanomami* leader, diplomat and scholar, DAVI KOPENAWA, "white people do not become shamans" (KOPENAWA & ALBERT 2013: 375). While some of his reasons for this assertion might be contested by those white people who claim to be practising shamanism[5], his key point is the individualism of white people. He thinks that all the antennas and other listening devices (physical or metaphorical) used by white people "only serve for them to listen to themselves" (*ibid.* 376). For KOPENAWA, to be a shaman is to intensify relationships with powerful other-than-human allies (especially those he calls *xapiri* – sometimes translated as "spirits" with evident unease), and with communities who need leadership, knowledge, healing and help.

KOPENAWA and other Amazonian shaman/diplomat/educators have profoundly influenced (other) scholars involved in the "ontological turn," and the "material turn" (*e.g.* VIVEIROS DE CASTRO 2007). Certainly they have enriched the study of what shamans do. It is now a leitmotif of recent "turns" and wider scholarship that Indigenous ontologies and their resultant notions of health and illness are often predicated on the understanding that while relationships compose beings as persons, those same relationships can be problematic. When the world is full of persons (only

some of whom are human), persons necessarily relate to others as predators or prey—needing to eat others and generally wishing not to be eaten (but sometimes willingly self-sacrificing to enable others to survive or thrive). These are fraught relations in which it is frequently necessary to call on others to mediate and resolve difficulties that are understood to have resulted in bad luck or ill-health. In extreme situations, animals might refuse to present themselves to hunters because of some breach of respectful etiquette or some insult to themselves or their close relations. In such situations, shamans are called on.

While their rituals may involve altered states of consciousness (including trance), the more definitive acts of shamans involve altered styles of communication or affective sensual communication (both of which might also abbreviate to ASC). It is, for instance, KOPENAWA's ability to relate well with *xapiri* (allies, helpers or "spirits") that enables him to serve his community as a healer, teacher, and diplomat. Doing so involves significant adjustments of his senses—especially but not only of sight, hearing and place—but also of comfort as the *yākoana* snuff hits him hard and prepares him to see the *xapiri* dancing and to hear them singing. Equally importantly, repeated encounters enable him to remember and increase understanding of the songs and what they teach. He is also adjusted so that he can speak and sing appropriately among his peers, community, and beyond. This shamanry is never a solitary or individual practice—nor one that individuates the shaman—but involves both initiators and initiates within human and larger-than-human communities.

In summary, the practices of shamanry address the interactive personhood that is both required and pressurised by the relationality of animistic worlds. In contrast, the practices of (neo) shamanism address the interiorised selfhood that is both required and pressurised by the separatist project of Modernity. Both Moderns and animists suffer a range of physical, mental, relational, and other stresses and problems which require appropriate forms of therapy. The violent invasion of Amazonia by European extractivists and their diseases have led *Yanomami* and other Indigenous peoples to seek to benefit from Western medicines. Customary practices, however, continue to be vital (important and life-giving). They provide resilience in and aid resistance by endangered communities in endangered forests and other bioregions.

The shamanism of Moderns (in *Latourian* terms) is of a different nature. It certainly cites what anthropologists and others have learnt among Indigenous shamans and their animistic communities. However, it does not resist the project of Modernity but embraces its individualising and interiorising—or its "spirituality." It certainly involves body practices and a sensuality of sound (recorded or live drum or rattle rhythms), sight (or deprivation of sight), and of posture if not always of movement. That is, its most popular expressions involve lying prone on the floor with eyes (or complete heads) covered while some rhythmic noise drives a desired altered state of (inner) consciousness. The therapeutic value of such acts is undoubtedly related to the difficulties of being encouraged to be(come) individuals in a hyperactive consumeristic and acquisitive world. It encourages a self-knowledge that aids individuated beings to deal with the stresses that are erupting in increased mental health problems. This shamanism is certainly a therapy but whether it is a shamanry is doubtful.

Conclusion

There are some things that seem obvious and uncontentious when we ask what "wellbeing" and "ill-health" mean. Someone with a broken bone may seem self-evidently "not well" and in need of healing. But is a boxer or rugby player with a broken nose "not well"? Other matters—such as hearing the voices of deceased relatives or deliberately cutting oneself—seem obvious signs of ill-health to some people but not to others. Some differences in the ways in which wellbeing and ill-health are defined are identifiable as "cultural" with the implication that it might be possible to draw up lists of what diverse cultures consider normal or abnormal, healthy or in need of treatment. Not all such differences are equal in the eyes of even the most liberal observer. Some body modifications and some deliberately induced sensations are more contentious than others. While male circumcision among Jews, Muslims, and Americans may be deemed questionable among some peo-

ple, the cutting of female genitalia is almost universally abhorred and condemned. The fact that both proponents of male and female genital modification *can* claim that these acts perfect or purify human bodies and/or prevent physical or moral wrongs makes relevant debates more difficult. Moreover, such claims point back to the starting point. How do we decide what wellbeing and ill-health are? Underlying that question is the more fundamental difficulty (as we are faced with considerable diversity of opinion and cultural practice) of knowing what a person is meant to be.

The wellbeing and the ill-health of persons moulded by the demands of individualising and consumerist societies are understood and perhaps experienced differently (to varying degrees) with those of societies that require increasing relationality. Both cultural complexes cause stresses as well as providing benefits. The promotion of health and/or resilience is intimately related to the ontologies and ambitions encouraged within particular communities. A larger discussion should take into account the kinds of connections and disconnections people have with the larger-than-human world. Like viruses and other pathogens, Climate Disaster and Mass Extinction[6] affect all persons (human or otherwise), regardless of their acceptance or rejection of such realities. Individualist and dividualist responses and experience might be as different in relation to health concerns and practices as they are in relation to media and other narratives. Being shaped as citizens of Nation States and as consumers (reliant on increasing extractivism) creates different kinds of person—and therefore different kinds of wellbeing and ill-health—from being shaped by the obligations of belonging within larger-than-human communities. Both forms of belonging impact everyone in this era, creating tensions as people try to be good citizens, careful consumers *and* respectful relations. The question raised in this article is how animist knowledges contribute to richer and healthier understandings of "good living."

Notes

1 I am grateful to Helmar Kurz for inviting me to present a keynote lecture at the 32nd annual conference of the Association for Anthropology and Medicine (AGEM), hosted at the University of Münster, Germany.

2 'Modernity' and 'Modernist' are capitalized through this essay in order to highlight, somewhat polemically, their character as a more-or-less deliberate ontology or a cultural-political-colonizing world-making project. Meanwhile, "animism" is not capitalized in order to avoid the suggestion that it is equivalent to the names of specific religions or cultures (e.g. Buddhism) but something more like a style of religion or culture (like 'polytheism').

3 The plural of Anishinaabe is Anishinaabeg. This Indigenous nation (whose traditional territories are in what is now also the northern Midwest of the United States and the central south of Canada) are also known as Ojibwa, Ojibwe, Chippewa and other names.

4 This provides an important corrective to mis-readings of Actor-Network Theory which emphasise those points rather than the interactions.

5 For example, Kopenawa thinks that perfumes and alcohol make white people 'too odorous and too hot', presumably for the liking of 'spirits' (Kopenawa and Albert 2013: 375). Many neoshamans agree that avoidance of alcohol and other stimulants is important. On the other hand, many of them think it is possible to shamanize without resorting to the kind of (DMT carrying) snuffs that Kopenawa insists are necessary for attracting and learning from the *xapiri* beings.

6 Both now such powerful shapers of the world that they require capitalization.

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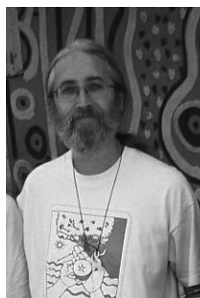

GRAHAM HARVEY is professor of religious studies at The Open University. His research largely concerns "the new animism," especially in the rituals and protocols through which Indigenous and other communities engage with the larger-than-human world. These contribute to a focus on material- and lived-religion. His recent teaching related work has involved a focus on foodways and associated "purity" practices. His publications include *Food, Sex and Strangers: Understanding Religion as Everyday Life* (2013), and *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (2nd edition 2017). He is editor of the Equinox series "Religion and the Senses" and the Routledge series "Vitality of Indigenous Religions."

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA
e-mail: graham.harvey@open.ac.uk