

# Gaia, nymphs and wakanda: on the root of animism

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*Can the root of animism be illustrated as follows? The sun, cliffs, fountains, trees, etc; and in our time the planet Earth as seen in the darkness of space: they have all lasted a long time despite perceived threats to their existence, and are thus attributed a will to survive.*

My second post talks about an idea that I originally developed three years ago in a 20-page article, which also contained the main point of the first post (albeit without the misleading-environment concept, as at the time I hadn't yet come across McKay & Dennett and Dunning's commentary). I should note that technical usage of terms, notably "agency", differs between the two posts on the one hand and the 20-page article on the other.

The idea concerns the root of animism. One particularly interesting example comes not from a traditional culture but right from the modern West. All page references in this post are to Robert Poole's 2008 book *Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Earth*. The picture on the next page shows NASA's *Earthrise* photograph, taken by Bill Anders (p. 25), on Christmas Eve 1968, on the first manned mission beyond Earth orbit (p. 1). In 2008 *The Economist* referred to it, writing about space tourism:

Many people date the emergence of the environmental movement to the publication of a photograph taken from *Apollo 8* of the Earth rising over the lunar horizon. When space becomes a democracy — or, at least, a plutocracy — the rich risk-takers who have seen the fragile Earth from above might form an influential cohort of environmental activists.

Similarly, Poole says (p. 108) "the most common reaction among astronauts to the sight of Earth has probably been heightened concern for the environment", and "among those who have seen the Earth from the Moon the sense of its fragility seems to have been particularly acute".

But the sight of Earth had a different effect as well. "As early as 1969 the microbiologist René Dubos related [in *A theology of the earth*] how the sight of the Apollo 8 Earth images 'made me realize that the Earth is a living organism'" (p. 171). And in the preface to his book *Gaia: A new look at life on Earth*, James Lovelock says:

Ancient belief and modern knowledge have fused emotionally in the awe with which astronauts with their own eyes and we by television have seen the Earth revealed in all its shining beauty against the deep darkness of space. Yet, this feeling, however strong, does not prove that Mother Earth lives. Like a religious belief, it is scientifically untestable and therefore incapable in its own context of further rationalization.

We see that Lovelock won't simply accept a feeling as proof. Also, his eureka moment of a living self-stabilising Earth, the germ of the Gaia hypothesis, predates the whole-Earth pictures (as Poole recounts, pp. 172–173). Yet clearly to him, as to Dubos, the sight of a scene like Earthrise somehow emotionally renders the Earth alive. Why? One factor I can think of is an implied motion in the scene. However, Lovelock sees “shining beauty” instead, “against the deep darkness of space”. To which Poole adds a clue (p. 195), namely implied time:

The framing [of the Earthrise picture] was important. Pictures of the home planet alone were blown up by NASA to fill the frame, but framed as a [lunar] landscape shot there was a lot of space around the rising Earth. Earth was seen in deep time as well as in deep space: the view seemed eternal, like a snapshot of the Creation.



Now remember the impression of fragility noted above, and the door to agency opens as follows. Isn't it remarkable for the delicate blue Earth to have existed so long in the deep darkness of space? How did it manage to survive there for a virtual eternity? An awe-inspiring record of survival, but what explains it? Perhaps the Earth *wanted* to survive?

This kind of reasoning can certainly be sound. Imagine having observed a small unknown thing for a while, and having thereby seen it evade several hazards without apparent help. The thing is probably an agent! Some kind of animal, we would assume. It has displayed a “remarkable-survival habit” in a hostile world.

Living things tend to have this habit, and the world is full of them. But here is a noteworthy example from outside the living world: the sun. Its long survival may also have the potential to come across as remarkable. Sunset could appear dramatic, not to mention the rare but spectacular phenomenon of solar eclipses. Such threats seem to have left their mark on mythology. What, one might thus speculate, if the sun always shone and never approached the horizon? It would then give people every reason to take it for granted. Would it still, to so many cultures, be a deity rather than a physical feature of the world?

I am tempted to put the resulting view on the root of animism as follows, adapting a passage from my first post. It is clearly in terms of a particular application of the agentic interpretation, one featuring the desire to survive as a cornerstone among the mental states attributed, that a lot of unaided remarkable-survival habits make sense; and one might not even entertain the thought that the environment would mix in other cases, such as that of the sun, where the agentic interpretation is no longer suitable. The sun does not desire to survive, but this is far less clear than that humans and animals *do*, at least for someone without a specific education or cultural context.

One might object that the sun visibly lacks the kind of behaviour typical of humans and animals. To respond, we could look beyond humans and animals. An oak tree in winter behaves even more lethargically than the sun, and yet it is alive. Thus, we could try the following variation. A lot of entities displaying unaided remarkable-survival habits have clearly something in common, namely those that are humans or animals or plants or fungi etc; and one might not even entertain the thought that the environment would mix in others, such as the sun, that fail to share in the property. The sun is not alive, but this is far less clear than that humans, animals, plants, fungi, etc *are* alive, at least for someone without a specific education or cultural context.

Whatever the merits of these adaptations of the misleading-environment perspective of the first post, however, I would submit as a hypothesis that remarkable-survival habits can lead to overattribution of agency. A couple of further illustrations, adding to Gaia and the sun, will follow below. First, let's consider: how could the hypothesis be tested against mythology? For testing, the sun is probably not what we want, since we need differential fragility or threats, to see if we get differential attribution of agency. So take instead rivers, for example. Those with occasionally low water levels might appear more fragile than those that are always abundant. A river-mythology expert could assemble a sample of cultures centred around a river each, and answer questions such as:

- are the scarce rivers more likely than the abundant ones to feature, in their respective culture, one resident river god or goddess that cannot easily leave the river?
- do appearances, of any sort, of a scarce river reveal more, in its respective culture, about the state of some god or goddess than do similar appearances of an abundant river?

Why these questions? See the 20-page article for discussion. Or just take a look at the following passage from the section *Of the Origin of Philosophy* in Adam Smith's *Essays on philosophical subjects*:

The sea is spread out into a calm, or heaved into a storm, according to the good pleasure of Neptune. Does the earth pour forth an exuberant harvest? It is owing to the indulgence of Ceres. Does the vine yield a plentiful vintage? It flows from the bounty of Bacchus. Do

either refuse their presents? It is ascribed to the displeasure of those offended deities. The tree, which now flourishes, and now decays, is inhabited by a Dryad, upon whose health or sickness its various appearances depend. The fountain, which sometimes flows in a copious, and sometimes in a scanty stream, which appears sometimes clear and limpid, and at other times muddy and disturbed, is affected in all its changes by the Naiad who dwells within it.

Whereas Neptune, Ceres and Bacchus could reside anywhere, the Dryad and the Naiad are described as inhabiting the tree and the fountain, respectively. And the Dryad's state of health governs the tree's appearances. The two nymphs would seem to be personifications of, and thus instances of agency overattribution to, natural things. By contrast, Neptune et al, as introduced here, appear to fill roles in the causation of *events* (see the first post).

And using the passage as a little test of its own, we see that it is exactly the two nymphs that relate to fragility in nature, manifest in the decaying tree and the scanty fountain stream. Now, had I combed through many texts on Roman or other mythology in search of evidence correlating personification with fragility, then having found one passage like this one would be unimpressive. But I must confess I haven't done that so far. Rather, I was studying Smith's text about the origin of philosophy for a different reason (see the 20-page article), and these were the supernatural agents introduced there (plus he mentions Jupiter's invisible hand, also causing certain events). This makes the passage more striking.

Notice, too, that the significance of finding personification correlated with fragility in even a small sample will tend to be enhanced by a surprise factor. A modern onlooker would probably have expected not the scarce but the abundant river to be the more likely deity. Yet the examples and analysis presented suggest that the key to deification may be not unchallenged might but a threat.

A criterion easily fulfilled in a sense, since almost anything under the sun can be seen as "under attack" from wind and weather. Mountains, for instance. Could one thus really get the impression that a mountain has withstood the elements for so long, much longer than any person or animal, because it *wanted* to survive? Apparently yes, judging by the following description of the Omaha concept *Wakon'da*, from *The Omaha Tribe* (1911) by Alice Fletcher and Francis La Flesche:

An invisible and continuous life was believed to permeate all things, seen and unseen. This life manifests itself in two ways: First, by causing to move — all motion, all actions of mind or body are because of this invisible life; second, *by causing permanency of structure and form, as in the rock, the physical features of the landscape, mountains, plains, streams, rivers, lakes, the animals and man.* This invisible life was also conceived of as being *similar to the will power of which man is conscious within himself* — a power by which things are brought to pass. [Emphases mine]

I recently found this as the first part of a larger quotation in a post by Lance Foster, who in a different post reports: "I know about cream/milk being given to nature spirits in old European traditions. The Norse called them landvaettir, the Anglo-Saxons called them wights, the French called them fay. My tribe [the Ioway, a Siouan tribe like the Omaha] called such beings who inhabited cliffs and rivers, 'wakanda.' That meant 'something old and mysterious that inhabits a place.' Later on Wakanda came to be applied to God." And another post sets out the meaning by syllable: *wa* "something", *kan* "that which is so old and mysterious it is beyond knowing",

*da* “to be located in a place”. There he also mentions (in an added comment) that the Algonquian equivalent is *Manitou*.

Wakan, Manitou, and about two dozen possibly related concepts such as the Roman *Numen*, used to be listed, as instances of an archetype, on the Wikipedia page of the *Mana* of the Pacific people. In light of my thoughts here, I wouldn’t be surprised if this archetype was motivated by remarkable-survival habits. However, as the first of the two manifestations of Wakon’da suggests, the motivating basis may extend to self-propelled motion, or the ability to cause events.