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The Cosmopolitical Applications of the “Spiritual” in Animist Cultures and Their Relevance to the Environmental Humanities Today

Fionn Bennett¹

Abstract:

Through a critical reading of Bruno Latour’s “cosmopolitics,” this paper maintains that the “animist” acceptance of “the spiritual” can be repurposed into a valuable mediating resource between humankind and the beleaguered planet we live upon. By adopting a “consequentialist standpoint” it assesses the “instrumental value” of the spiritual as a means to foster improved Man-Nature relations. In this assessment I focus on the way “animist cultures” tend to regard the natural environment as sentient and “besouled” and the way this inclines them to avoid abusing their fellow creatures. I also consider how they interacted with their environment for productivistic and consumeristic purposes while simultaneously venerating it. Finally, I show how animists submit both humankind and its non-human Other to a “cosmodicy” which constrains both to relate to and interact with one other on an “I-Thou” basis, thereby facilitating dialogue and an “*entente cordiale*” between humanity and nature.

Keywords: spirituality and the Anthropocene; spirituality and environmental humanities; the spiritual and cosmopolitics; Bruno Latour; animist being-in-the-world; animism and technology

Introduction

The goal of this paper is to enter into an irenic and hopefully productive dialogue with those colleagues who doubt that “the spiritual” can be a valid and valuable “operational concept” for research in the human sciences and, in particular, in the area of “Environmental humanities.” To

¹ Fionn BENNETT is a Philosopher of Language and Associate Professor at the Université de Reims (France) specialising in Comparative Indo-European Poetics, *Musica Speculativa* and Intermedial Semiotics. Since defending his thesis on Martin Heidegger’s philosophy of language, his research has concentrated on the links between language and music. Pursuing a radically “Cratylean” line of thought, he is currently exploring the role once played by melody and rhythm in ancient verse to ensure that language and the natural world were “co-natured” to one another. As part of the *Synthèse* he is completing for his Habilitation, he will look at the way language’s roots in musical sound continues to be a part of the very substance of modern language. In recent years, he has branched out into Environmental Humanities. Through his work in this area he makes the case that the only way Global Society can avert a self-inflicted ecological cataclysm is by emulating the strategies that “Animist” cultures used to negotiate an *entente cordiale* with the natural environment that hosted their existence.

illustrate and dramatise my reasons for wanting to do this I begin by referring to an incident I witnessed in 2014 at a big international conference in Paris whose theme was “Thinking the Anthropocene.”

Like any conference, it is hard to summarise in a few words what characterised it most. Still it is safe to say that this one was dominated by an ill-disguised tension, not to say open conflict between two varieties of scientists. On one side were prominent thinkers in the “exact sciences” and facing them their homologues in the “human sciences.” At issue in their duel was the role “the spiritual” could or should play in dealing with the now scarcely deniable threat humanity-induced ecocide poses to us all.

The dispute unfolded in a highly unexpected way. Armed with up-to-date data concerning “Earth Systems trends,” speaker after speaker from the natural sciences took the stage to deliver the same chilling message: climate change is not the figment of some farfetched “dark green, deep ecology” fantasy; it is instead a reality and a menace to the material condition of possibility of Global Society and potentially the survival of our species; as a result, it is important for all present to get the message across and make sure it had an appropriate attitude and behaviour-changing impact. To increase the chances of this happening, the suggestion was made – notably by Will Steffen and Clive Hamilton – that humankind’s sensibility, aspirations, values, choices and conduct be subjected to the influence of normalising “function system” analogous to the one played by “myths,” “religion” and “spirituality” in “traditional cultures” and in particular those usually qualified as “animistic.”

The logic behind the idea is as disarmingly simple as it is eminently plausible. It rests upon the observation that, throughout the latest geological epoch, the Holocene, the aggregate impact of human activity upon the natural environment has been negligible. However since around 1950 key “Earth Systems indicators” underwent a “Great Acceleration”;² that is to say, an alteration of planetary eco-system functions which has resulted in unsustainable biodiversity depletion, deforestation, desertification, deglaciation, rising sea levels, atmospheric pollution and other developments directly imputable to the fact that *homo consumens* is “fracking” our biosphere to the edge of a “tipping point” that could precipitate “civilisation collapse” or even a “sixth mass extinction.” So as these things are supremely undesirable, but unavoidable if we do not change the way we interact with our planetary life support system, it can only be in our own interest – the natural scientists claimed – to emulate and operationalise those features of primitive, “animistic” societies

² STEFFEN *et al.*, “The trajectory of the Anthropocene,” p. 81-98.

that, presumably, played a role in preventing them treating their natural surroundings like frack fodder. Specifically – they stressed – we should adopt the way the latter engineered the “spiritual” into a resource for negotiating an *entente cordiale* with their other-than-human surroundings and factor this resource into our own norms and values, tastes and aspirations, commerce and industry, science and technology and, ultimately, our entire way of life.

The discrete but unmistakable implication of this line of reasoning was that environmental humanities scholars play a leading role in the task that lies ahead. Less discrete, but just as unmistakable, was the response from the ostensibly eco-friendly colleagues so addressed.

Led by Bruno Latour, they let it be known that it was out of the question for them to respond favourably to their well-intentioned but misguided homologues in the hard sciences. Doing that entailed tacit approval of all the “naïve” Foundationalist, Essentialist, Modernist and Positivist *métarécits* and myths so roundly decried by the *maîtres à penser* from whom they imbibed their cherished deconstructivist-reflexivist orthodoxies. As a result – they affirmed – we should stop looking for solutions for these urgent problems by sifting around in the rubbish heap of obscurantist ideas and instead address them like educated, rational and responsible adults.

Now, obviously, one should not overlook the reasons why it is to the credit of these partisans of “critical thought,” constructivism, postmodernity and “*les valeurs soixante-huitardes*” to adopt such a position. Since Nietzsche it has been an article of faith among educated people everywhere that totalising, all-unifying “higher principles,” like those that structure and modulate Platonic metaphysics, Hegelian “*absolute Wissen*” and their “onto-theological” spinoffs, amount to “higher swindles.” And few today would argue with Foucault, Bourdieu, Deleuze and others who emphasise that these “fictions” have been cynically manipulated for centuries by “state machines” to constitute “hegemonic signifying regimes” or totalitarian “epistemic orders” ever ready to justify injustice, oppression and crimes.³

About this there can be no objection. But if this is legitimate as a concern, so it is to believe that Global Society should be refused no resource that might prove useful for negotiating an *entente cordiale* with Nature and in that way assure its ecological conditions of possibility. Which is why it is hard to see the sense of repudiating the view of those scientists who believe that to deal with our climate change emergency part of the solution could lie in adapting to our own needs the conceptual, speculative and operational resources used by extra-modern cultures to deal with a similar

³ On which see NIEMAN, *Evil in Modern Thought*, p. 182.

challenge. And the sense of repudiating their suggestion is all the harder to see when we bear in mind that their motivation for invoking the “spiritual” or the “transcendent” has nothing to do with promoting a theistic supernaturalism or proselytising on behalf of Islam, Buddhism or Aborigine nature lore⁴. Nor is it to decry modernism or threnodise about the passing of an Edenic past that exists nowhere except as a conceit in the imagination of some *romantique attardé*. What they see in the role played by spirituality in traditional strategies for engineering a sustainable *modus vivendi* with nature is its instrumental value. Alternately, they adopt a “consequentialist standpoint” to assess the worth of various ways to handle our climate change emergency and conclude that it is not inconceivable that the conceptual and speculative resources one finds in “traditional societies” could be a part of the blend. So, as long as that is understood, as long as it is clear that no one is invoking the “transcendent” or the spiritual for anything other than its instrumental value as a means to prevent human activity deserving the interests both of our more-than-human *Umwelt* and therefore of ourselves, what, they ask, is the problem?

On the occasion we are discussing, the answer to this question was provided by Bruno Latour, and it was candid: the proposed operationalisation of “the spiritual” is impracticable because “there is no transcendent” and one cannot attempt to breathe life into the corpse the idea has become by making it a *pis-aller* to facilitate man-nature dialogue without affronting human dignity. Moreover, thanks to his reason, his sense of responsibility and his creativity, *homo sapiens sapiens* is equipped with everything he needs to deal with the challenges posed by the advent of the Anthropocene.

Now there are many things in this view that deserve a long discussion – and not just to ironise at the expense of the *maître à penser* who pronounced them. Let us nevertheless limit ourselves to a consideration of Latour’s main points, beginning with a closer look at what exactly Latour objects to in the suggestion that, to deal effectively with the ecological emergency we face, valuable lessons can be learned from the role played by the “spiritual” in “animist” cultures.

⁴ That this is an entirely viable aspiration is eloquently and energetically illustrated in Eduardo VIVEIROS DE CASTRO’s numerous works on Amerindian cultures and their “ontologies”. In his attempt to demonstrate that “nature and culture” are not condemned to be in a disharmonious relationship, he appeals to the “shamanic” notion of a “hyper-uranian” “Supernature” as a resource for making humankind and its other co-equals and interdependent co-actors in one and the same “sociocosmic field” without by so doing reintroducing any of the characteristics of institutional religions, e.g., the monotheistic Abrahamic religions, that many would consider to be retrograde (on which see, *inter alia*, VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, *Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere*, p. 95. The same argument is made in BENNETT, “Post-Rational Eco-Communicological Aporias, Pre-Rational Eco-Communicological Euporias,” p. 6-10).

The “Spiritual?” *What* “Spiritual?”

This question is all the more necessary given that the “spiritual” *per se* is not something Latour objects to. That would hardly make sense given that he openly admits to being a practicing Roman Catholic. What he does object to, however, is interpreting the spiritual the wrong way, which is what we do when we equate it with the way “pre-rational” “animistic” worldviews are supposed to have understood it to be.

But what is the “animistic worldview?” Is there a convenient, uncontroversial, all-purpose way to qualify the animistic acceptance of the spiritual and what it is supposed to consist of and be useful for?

Obviously a satisfyingly comprehensive treatment of this question would be long. At the fore of the reasons why this would be the case concerns the ongoing reverberations of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s ground-breaking study of indigenous Amerindian cultures and cosmovisions and how this has altered the long established but now dated acceptance of animism proposed by Edward Burnett Tylor, especially through the works of Philippe Descola, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and, *mutatis mutandis*, Marshall Sahlins. Another and more fundamental reason concerns the impact of Michel Foucault’s epoch-ending observations about the collapse of the “*figure de l’homme*” that we in the Occident have so naively taken for granted as the universal exemplar or benchmark of Humankind⁵. The now patent illegitimacy of this assumption entailed two key transformations. The first is epistemic. Because the now superannuated “*figure de l’homme*” had functioned as the foundation and point of departure for our understanding of humanity’s “other”, its disintegration entailed the obsolescence of the conceptual and epistemic resources we had hitherto relied upon to order and understand everything that isn’t human (e.g., *Weltkenntniss*, *Naturwissenschaft*). Secondly, the collapse of belief in the legitimacy and viability of the “classical”, “Eurocentric” *figure de l’homme* fostered a curiosity and a desire to understand and even to take seriously alternative “*figures de l’homme*”. Not surprisingly, “animist” cultures and the notions entertained by the people belonging to them as to who they took themselves to be and what kind of reality they dwelt in became a hot

⁵ FOUCAULT, *Les mots et les choses*, p. 307: “De nos jours, et Nietzsche là encore indique de loin le point d’inflexion, ce n’est pas tellement l’absence ou la mort de Dieu qui est affirmée mais la fin de l’homme”.

topic among anthropologists – and in the process set in train a flurry of quite animated and highly technical “*disputationes*” about how to interpret and define what they were investigating.⁶

Mercifully, for the very specific the needs of this paper a full-scale appraisal of the views expressed in these debates is neither necessary nor useful. Indeed, for our purposes Edward Tylor’s simple definition of animism suffices – as long, of course, as it is understood that I reject out of hand the latter’s suggestion that there is something “childlike” about the animist’s worldview. Specifically, what characterises animists most is a recognition of their debt to inscrutable, supra-mundane — but very much alive! — agencies that simultaneously give (i) their world to them, (ii) them to their world and, therefore, (iii) the blessing of everything good that Being-in-the-world has to offer.⁷ In virtue of this “pan-spiritism,” animists are necessitated to a respectful “I-Thou” relationship to everything with which they share their Being-in-the-world.⁸ Unsurprisingly, they behave accordingly. Specifically, they avoid mindless mistreatment of the natural environment. Not just out of prudence or high-mindedness or compunction. Also, and indeed more so, because they tend to regard the spirits of the beings with whom they share their *Lebenswelt* as no less deserving of consideration and solicitude as themselves.

But this and other potential eco-positive consequences we can consider anon. Here let us concentrate on what Latour and his cohorts reject about this worldview. What they repudiate and scorn in the animists’ “pan-spiritism” and its concomitant “mode of existence” is that it is viable only by transcendentalising the spiritual. That is to say, it entails, nay *requires* attributing (i) to the

⁶ This, of course, is to be expected among specialists and thinkers belonging neither to the same school of thought, nor sharing the same approach – as in the case, for example, of the reception of Nurit Bird-David’s “‘Animism’ Revisited” by her peers (see BIRD-DAVID, “‘Animism’ Revisited”, p. 79-86). Less to be expected is to witness Philippe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro confront one another in their now celebrated 2009 “*disputatio*” at the *Institute of Advanced Studies* in Paris (see LATOUR, “Perspectivism: ‘Type’ or ‘Bomb’,” p. 1-2) with both parties claiming, *mutatis mutandis*, to be partisans of Lévi-Strauss. And yet there are reasons for this. For beyond the question of what some see as unnecessary hair-splitting in Descola’s idea of the need for a quadripartite ontological taxonomy to define the animist worldview, there are substantive issues and stakes. Namely, whether it is worthwhile to continue to approach animist worldviews as clinically and disinterestedly as the way in which Descola investigates them, or instead view them as models for Being-in-the-world that it behooves us to heed and emulate as Viveiros de Castro clearly believes. On this matter suffice it to say that I for one am very much on the latter’s side.

⁷ For the views and interpretations of “animism” that counts for this paper, see, HARVEY, *Animism*; HARVEY (ed.), *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*; VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism”; VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, *Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere*; BIRD-DAVID, “‘Animism’ revisited: personhood, environment, and relational epistemology”; SEPIE, “More than Stories, More than Myths” and, despite reservations, DESCOLA, *Par-delà nature et culture*.

⁸ On this feature of animist cultures, see, *inter alia*, BIRD-DAVID, “The Giving Environment,” p. 189-196; KLINK, “Nature, Theology, and Technology,” p. 203-210.

existence of humankind, (ii) to the world hosting it, and (iii) to the relation between them a supervenient role for something other and — heaven forbid! — higher than *homo sapiens*. Alternatively, it identifies the spiritual with what Daniel Dennett calls an “uncontrollable externality,” or as Latour puts it with puerile scurrility in his Gifford Lectures, “OWWAAB,” acronym for some mystical “Out-of-Which-We-Are-All-Born.”⁹

For Latour this, as suggested above, is unacceptable for two reasons. First because identifying the spiritual with this “OWWAAB” and conferring upon it decisive cosmopolitical prerogatives amounts to stripping *homo sapiens* of the privilege of negotiating among members of his kind about the determination of the spiritual that meets *their* requirements about what it should and should not be and can and cannot do. This, reckons Latour, is degrading.

What, then, is the alternative? What becomes of the spiritual and its operationalisations once we foreswear not just superannuated animistic mythifying and mystifying about it but also its equally misbegotten philosophical, theological, naturalistic and “deep ecology” reprises?

For Latour it lies in what he referred to in *Politiques de la Nature* as “political ecology.” This consists of instituting a forum called a “parliament of things.” Through the use of this epithet we are to understand that in this body are represented all the stakeholders in the fate of the planet because it would be a “Collective of Humans and Nonhumans.” The mandate and mission of this “pluriversal” assembly is to redact a “geostory” that would be a synthesis of the views of everyone in the synod about what this story should be and what it should and should not be used for. To be sure that work on the geostory to be redacted is expedited irenically and in the spirit of consensus one admits to this parliament only those who are “enlightened” and “cosmopolitan” enough to recognise the importance of compromise and tolerance. A stipulation that entails the exclusion of the benighted “mono-naturalists” who might try to influence the outcome of the negotiations with sectarian preconditions and redlines. People of OWWAAB stay away!¹⁰ Once this potential nuisance has been disposed of, one is prepared to attain consensus on the role — or non-role — of the spiritual in finding solutions for our climate emergency.

This, then, would be the “right” way to determine the spiritual for ecological purposes. “Right” not just because it is consensual, tolerant and inclusive, but also because it is “civilised,” in the sense that it (a) delivers the spiritual from its erstwhile use as a means to propagate dehumanising,

⁹ LATOUR, *Facing Gaia*, p. 159.

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, p. 14.

“totalising *métarécits*” and (b) transforms it into a resource that serves what “political ecology” deems to be best suited to what *homo sapiens* needs from it. And it warrants noting that on decisions like these it is indeed *homo sapiens* who calls the shots. This is inevitable given that the “nonhuman” stakeholders in this “parliament of things” depend on the “-logies” and “-graphies” provided for them by their human counterparts so that in this guise they can express what is supposed to be “their” views.¹¹

Presently we shall return to the troubling implications of this “civilised” way of giving a voice to humankind’s non-human other. And not just to ask if it does not merely institutionalise the exclusion of the other-than-human and promote a purely “speciesist,” purely “anthropocratic” agenda instead. We will also consider if “political ecology” really helps “the earthbound” confront climate change — or simply makes matters worse. In the meantime, let us consider the second reason for rejecting the identification of the spiritual with the animists’ “OWWAAB,” namely the view that the “transcendental does not exist” and, as a result, transcendentalising the spiritual boils down to consigning it to inexistence.

Quite apart from the question of whether animists are not more immanentist than transcendentalist in their views on the spiritual, to say that the “transcendent,” and therefore the spiritual *qua* transcendent, “does not exist” is not an argument. At least it is not one that is any stronger than the case made by anyone who says, “it does exist.” To see why, just consider the operative assumption in the affirmation a “transcendent” spiritual “does not exist.” The probative value of this

¹¹ LATOUR, *Politiques de la nature*, p. 103. Be it noted that our criticism of reliance upon the “-graphies” and “-logies” to which Latour refers to assist other-than-human *entities* to express themselves extends also to the efforts of ethnologists and anthropologists to represent the thinking, feelings and ideas of peoples belonging to other-than-European *cultures*. There are three reasons for this. First because adopting a high-altitude, bird’s eye “*in vitro*” perspective on “exotic” cultures cannot but empty them of a proper understanding of the ‘*tatsächliche, gelebte Erfahrung*’ without which the social phenomena one analyses as an “object” would never have existed (on which see GEERTZ, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 3-30). Second, no matter how well-intentioned one may be, when one analyses ‘*Naturvölker*’ with conceptual and analytic resources distilled from the culture, history and shared experience of only one people, one cannot but be “ethnocentric” in one’s endeavours (VIVEIROS de CASTRO, “*Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism*,” p. 474-476). Finally, it is no objection – *pace* Philippe Descola – to affirm that unless anthropologists adhere to common concepts, frames of references, descriptive terms and explanatory models, then analysis, discussion and understanding will disintegrate into a frivolous, impressionistic or intuitionist free-for-all. This may once have been a valid concern. However, it has now been superseded by the need to adopt and operationalise a “cosmovision” and a cosmopolitics that restores a sustainable *modus vivendi* between our species and the planet it inhabits. Meeting this challenge requires listening to and learning both from Indigenous peoples *in their own terms* and from the natural world *in its own terms* instead of treating them as “subalterns” in the way Gayatri Spivak uses this expression (SPIVAK, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, p. 66-104). So, in so far as Latour’s “-logies” and “-graphies” prevent us hearing what the voice of the non-human world has to tell us, they should be ignored.

view stems from the reasonable premise that if you want to say it exists, you should offer some credible proof of its existence and that if you cannot do so, then it is unreasonable to make the claim and even more unreasonable to militate for giving it a decisive role in dealing with our climate change emergency.

Now this is a line of reasoning most would readily accept. In any event it is coherent. There is however a problem: this sort of reasoning cuts both ways. For if it is reasonable to ask for proof of the existence of the spirit when one wants to give it a decisive role in managing anything, then by the same token it is not unreasonable to expect some *proof of its inexistence* in the event one wanted to deny the spirit an operational function on the grounds that it “does not exist.” However, necessarily, Latour and other “*ni dieu, ni maître*” ideologues are no better placed to do this than the “naïve,” “juvenile” obscurantists they mock. Which means that what separates “*les soixante-huitards*” and their obscurantist enemies has nothing to do with the *ontological* question of whether or not the spirit exists. All that separates them in reality is a *preference* about whether it exists or not. Alternately, the views expressed are *desiderative*. Consequently, it is as *desiderata* that these competing views must be assessed and either accepted or not.

So let us do that. Let us judge for ourselves the merits of these competing *desiderata*. But let us be clear about our criteria. Let our assessment be based *not* upon what the parties to the dispute identify as things they dislike in the views defended by their opponents. Indeed, let us avoid making our own ideological prejudices the basis for our judgement. Let the yardstick for our judgment be based only on which of the two opposing conceptions of the spiritual is the better suited for dealing with *nostrum aevum*’s greatest challenge – avoiding a sixth mass extinction.

Now if we do that, it is at least arguable that the one proposed by Will Steffen and Clive Hamilton is immeasurably better. After all, they are advocating an operationalisation of the spiritual which has a proven record of success in promoting a harmonious *entente cordiale* between man and nature going right back to the Pleistocene.

With what their opponents are proposing, we are sure to have a world free from obscurantism and one where the proverbial “*analphabètes, aphasiques et acéphales*” will be better off.¹² But not one where we will be better equipped with the conceptual, speculative and operational tools that will help us avert a sixth mass extinction. To see why, let us return to what Latour proposes as a strategy to deliver our imperilled ecological life-support system from impending doom. This

¹² See DELEUZE and GUATTARI, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?*, p. 105.

time, however, let us switch the focus from “political ecology” to Latour’s ideas on “modernising modernism” with a variant of social constructivism he calls “compositionist cosmopolitics.”

“Compositionist cosmopolitics”: Dealing with ecocide the way Nero dealt with Rome on fire?

To grasp what this means and how it is relevant to contemporary Eco-criticism one needs to understand that for Latour climate change is not a “matter of fact” because “matters of fact” do not exist, only “matters of concern.”¹³ Moreover, because “matters of concern” on any particular issue vary from one group of stakeholders to the next, they are always intrinsically “disputable.” Hence, it is unacceptable for any one group of concerned stakeholders to impose their “disputable” views on how to deal with any given issue upon anyone who does not share their “concern.” This is why we need “compositionism.” In other words, as rational and responsible stakeholders in the future well-being of the cosmos among other rational and responsible stakeholders all facing the need to deal rationally and responsibly with a real problem, we are enjoined to get together to “compose” a sane, viable and just solution to our common problem.

Now it is hardly surprising that an ambitious, communication savvy head of research in a major political science institute would say such a thing. And no doubt what Latour says about compositionism will be heeded by the environmental policymaking establishment with the same attentiveness they show to the Panglossian storylines generated by Latour’s friends in “Ecological Modernisation Studies” as well as to those who see climate change as an “opportunity” to geo-engineer “smart climate” or “climate resilient growth.”¹⁴

Still, it is hard to see how he succeeds in dealing with a major challenge. Namely addressing and allaying the concerns raised for decades by “deep ecology” zealots and their Neo-Marxian or Neo-Malthusian fellows-in-arms. Their view is that this is exactly what we have been doing for years. We have subcontracted our responsibility for what to do about ecocide to rational, responsible, informed, concerned, qualified individuals like Monsieur Latour so that he and his peers can “compose” adapted, just and workable solutions. And how have we been rewarded for our trust and patience? With ever worsening biodiversity depletion, deforestation, deglaciation, rising sea

¹³ LATOUR, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,” p. 225-248. See also LATOUR, “An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto.’”

¹⁴ For a lucid consideration of these disturbing developments, cf. HAMILTON, “The Theodicy of the ‘Good Anthropocene,’” p. 233-238.

levels, atmospheric pollution, etc. Little wonder therefore that some look at Latour's "compositionist cosmopolitics" as tantamount to dealing with climate change the way Nero dealt with Rome on fire. And not just because his "political ecology" solution clearly is not up to the job. Also because of what he says about "modernising modernism" where he expresses the view that if we stop doing what we have been doing to generate ecologically "catastrophic outcomes," we will squander an opportunity to further "develop" the technologies that create "unwanted consequences," and without this further development we squander an opportunity to outdo "Dr Frankenstein" in the effort to ditch "God the Creator"!¹⁵

But let us dwell no more on Latour. First, because there is no actual proof of Latour's complicity with climate criminals. Second, Latour is far from being alone in rejecting the idea of giving the spiritual or any other "transcendent agency" a normatising mission in human affairs even if – *nolens volens* – it could be useful for averting ecocide. As a result, there would be little point or justice in criticising him for holding this view if one did not also criticise everyone else who holds substantially the same view. Besides Bruno Latour *per se* is not at issue here. In fact, all that interests us about his discourse is what it reveals about the dire ecological consequences of *not* embracing the animists' acceptance of the spiritual and operationalising it by making it a resource for negotiating an *entente cordiale* with our more-than-human environment.

But why suppose that when we do not forego such an option, things will be any better? Alternately, why suppose that "operationalising" the spiritual will result in an improved relationship between humankind and our other-than-human *Umwelt*?

Making the Spiritual a resource for an eco-friendly "mode of Being-in-the-world"

First of all, it has to be recognised that the positive consequences of operationalisation the spiritual for ecological purposes is not achieved by the mere decision to confer legitimacy upon the idea. This is so because there is always the risk that its operationalisation can be misapplied, in which case the results will either be less than optimal or downright negative.¹⁶ And even when it is applied

¹⁵ LATOUR, "Love Your Monsters," 2011.

¹⁶ The examples routinely invoked to illustrate this point are the ecological calamities that occurred on Easter Island and Pitcairn Island in the Pacific Ocean. Though the supposed causes of these tragedies are contested, especially as concerns sensationalistic accounts like J. DIAMOND's best-selling *Collapse* (on which see MCANANY and YOFFEE [eds.], *Questioning Collapse*), it cannot be denied that even the most keenly eco-conscious cultures can make mistakes that can prove catastrophic.

judiciously, and thus yields the expected benefits, there will always be the risk that these benefits may be misappropriated. Everyone knows how well the spiritual sells when it has a market value!

But when this is *NOT* the case, when the operationalisation of the spiritual is neither misapplied nor requisitioned for improper purposes, there are very good reasons to believe that the initiative is eminently conducive to the creation of improved relations between man and nature. We see why when we consider what distinguishes “animist” cultures most. Namely the fact that for them the natural world and everything in it is “besouled.” Not in the same way human beings are. But enough so that the way one interacts with the world and the beings it hosts is not significantly different from the way one interacts with members of one’s own kind. We see how this feature of animist cultures is amenable to harmonious man-nature relations when we consider why we tend to avoid bad relations with our peers and instead aim for the greatest degree of harmonious relations possible.

As living and sentient beings we know what pleasure and pain, well-being and suffering are. We have “self-esteem” and as a result we cannot bear being exploited, despoiled or made the victims of injustice. We recognise that it is more in our interest to have good relationships with our peers than to have bad ones. More precisely, we know that we can hope for more for ourselves by collaborating with our peers than by trying to coerce, oppress, ruin or prey upon them.

All this we understand. As a result, we have no trouble understanding why our relationship with nature will be better from the moment we recognise that it is as alive and sensitive as we are. For if we abuse it, it will suffer and being responsible for that pain dishonours us. If we “frack” it, we commit an injustice, even a crime, and supposedly “civilised” people do not behave that way. If out of selfishness or indifference we neglect a relationship with it characterised by “reciprocity” (*do ut des*) it is ourselves who come out the loser, and we know it.

But believing nature is alive and “be-souled” was not the main factor in promoting harmonious and sustainable relations between animist communities and the natural environment in whose midst they dwelt. Nor indeed was it their tendency to “eucharise” the other-than-human by regarding it as something “enchanted,” though this too contributed to eco-friendly behaviour on their part. The real reason for the *entente cordiale* they enjoyed with nature lies in the way they considered its cosmos-creating, life-sustaining dynamics to be endowed with a voice and a language. A voice and a language that, to his credit, Lévi-Strauss went to such lengths to stress could be codified but in

one medium – namely through the medium of music.¹⁷ A music not merely to be listened to and enjoyed but also to be reflected upon, learned from and structured by so that the intelligence it relates can be factored not just into one's own life but also into the way of life of everyone in one's community, even where it concerned very concrete, practical and utilitarian finalities. A good illustration of this — but certainly not the only one — is J.-P. Vernant's portrayal of the way the archaic Hellenes operationalised the spiritual in their industry and technology (*cheîrotéchne*) for purely productivistic and consumeristic finalities.¹⁸

Making the Spiritual a resource for an eco-friendly mode of interacting productively and sustainably with the Other-than-human *Umwelt*

The organising principle of this “*cheîrotéchne*” – related to its practitioners by *Natura loquens* – was the assumption that its praxis was legitimate only if and only to the extent that it sub-served what is best called a “cosmonomy.” This latter stipulated that everything in the universe has a time, place, nature and function that is appropriate for it to occupy because doing so complemented the time, place, nature and function of all the other beings it shares the cosmos with.¹⁹ To respect the requirement that they abide by the tenets (*nomoi*) of this cosmonomy and yet interact with the *Umwelt* to cater to specifically human needs and desires, archaic artificers resorted to a canny expedient: they replicated the ingenuity (*eumēchaniké*) that spiritual actants used to produce the natural environment in the technologies they used to satisfy mortal needs and desires. Doing this *necessitated* them to a harmonious, just and sustainable relationship with the natural world and the resources it offers humankind to satisfy its own needs. For if nature respects a cosmonomy in the way it creates the resources needed to sustain life on earth, then replicating the same *modus operandi* in the way one

¹⁷ On Claude Lévi-Strauss's views on “*le caractère commun du mythe et de l'oeuvre musicale*”, see esp. LEVI-STRAUSS, *Le cru et le cuit*, p. 23-37. Though he was right to mention that Richard Wagner, Georges Dumézil and Marcel Granet had anticipated him in this insight, an arguably better illustration of the way “*Naturvölker*” rely upon musical arrangements of sound to relate the intelligence afforded to them by other-than-human agencies and actants in the natural environment is provided by Steven FELD in his *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli expression* (1982) and Charles BOILES in “Les chants instrumentaux des Tepehuas” (1973). For a cross-cultural and transhistorical perspective on the same matter, one would be hard pressed to find a better study than Marius SCHNEIDER's encyclopaedic “Le rôle de la musique dans la mythologie et les rites des civilisations non Européennes” (1960).

¹⁸ See VERNANT, *Mythe et pensée chez les grecs*, p. 302ff. Cf. HARVEY (ed.), *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*.

¹⁹ VERNANT, *Mythe et pensée chez les grecs*, p. 235, 406.

uses technology to convert those natural resources into goods that help mortals live better is also to abide by the rules of the same cosmonomy.²⁰

Can it be objected that the obligation of respecting this cosmonomy “limited” what artisans were allowed to do with their craft to satisfy human needs and desires? It certainly can. Conscientious artisans were not allowed to use *cheîrotéchne* for purposes which infringed the rights of “the spirits” who gave them their raw materials, and this did indeed limit how far their craft could go in catering to exclusively human self-interest, acquisitiveness and cupidity.

Does this limitation mean that the well-being or “quality of life” of the artisan’s client community was therefore less than optimal or adversely affected? If we assumed that the communities in question wanted the same hedonistic gratification from their industries and technologies that *homo consumens* today wants from his, the answer would have to be, yes, it does. However, making such an assumption is absurd.

Like all supposedly “primitive” peoples, the Hellenes of yore were very realistic both about what they took “well-being” and “felicity” to mean and about what had to be done to attain it. For from what they learned by heeding *Natura loquens* they knew that it was vain and even dangerous to seek the gratification of their “pleasure principle” independently of certain realities over which they had no control but upon whose operations their own existences were totally dependent. From this they drew the conclusion that, insofar as happiness and well-being were things that mortals could aspire to and enjoy, they could only be the happiness and well-being it was good for the cosmic order for them to enjoy. Hence, as this particular, cosmonomically prescribed kind of felicity was the only one it was reasonable to hope for, this was the kind of felicity their *cheîrotéchne* was specifically designed to satisfy. Which means that the technology used then to cater to mortal needs and desires was no more limited in the way it assisted folks at that time to attain the well-being they hoped for from it than ours is in assisting us to attain the felicity we hope for from ours. The only difference is that the felicity their technologies helped them to attain did not depend on wantonly pillaging their natural environment to satisfy cupidity of their own kind, whereas we seem to not see this as a problem in the way we use ours to gratify the felicity we covet.

And this brings us back to the message we want to address to the colleagues in the environmental humanities who doubt that the spiritual is a valid operational concept for their area of

²⁰ For a fuller treatment of this key point, see BENNETT, “Artefactualising the Sacred,” p. 59-63 and the remarks contained therein on the “philosophies of technology” espoused by Jacques Ellul, Gilbert Simondon and Martin Heidegger.

research. For even if there are valid reasons to doubt that everything the spiritual was operationalised for in animist cultures is necessarily applicable to our own age, and even if there are features of the modern world we would naturally hesitate to sacrifice for any reason, we should not without doubt that “primitive” societies have important lessons to offer us about how to deal with the current ecological crisis. Alternately, and more to the point, what is to be feared by listening to the advice they would give us about how to deal with human-induced degradation of our biosphere is not that by so doing we make ourselves liable to the accusation that we are being juvenile, naïve or obscurantist. What we should really dread are the consequences of not heeding and acting on what they have to say.

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