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Article:

Burley, M (2019) "A Language in Which to Think of the World" –Animism, Indigenous Traditions, and the Deprovincialization of Philosophy of Religion. *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, 18 (3). pp. 466-490. ISSN: 1530-5228

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“A LANGUAGE IN WHICH TO THINK OF THE WORLD”: ANIMISM, INDIGENOUS TRADITIONS, AND THE DEPROVINCIALIZATION OF PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

The phrase “a language in which to think of the world” derives from a discussion by the philosopher D. Z. Phillips of the notion of animism or, more specifically, of certain forms of animistic expression exemplified by particular Native Americans.¹ Commenting on an earlier essay by Mario von der Ruhr, Phillips endorses the contention that when Native Americans speak in terms that, for example, attribute the power of speech to trees and rocks and ascribe emotions to the “spirit of the land,” the available interpretive options are not limited to a simplistic dichotomy between “literal” and “metaphorical” meaning.² There is, Phillips concurs, a third possibility, which is to hear the forms of words at issue as presenting us with, precisely, “a language in which to think of the world.” What this third interpretive option facilitates is an understanding of the animistic modes of expression as insinuating neither that trees and rocks speak in exactly the same way as humans do, nor that they speak in a merely metaphorical sense (and hence, from a literal point of view, do not *really* speak at all). Rather, the modes of expression can be regarded as an entry point into a perspective on the world that offers alternative ways of conceptualizing living beings along with what, from a modern Western cultural standpoint, are liable to be construed as inert or inorganic components of the natural environment.

On the account to which I have just referred, the verbal and written affirmations of indigenous peoples can provide a means of accessing perspectives on the world that diverge from those with which modern Western readers may be most familiar. And the philosophical approach exemplified by von der Ruhr and Phillips provides a means by which indigenous traditions may be brought within the purview of philosophy of religion; or rather, it provides a means of expanding that purview to better accommodate discussion of the traditions in question. It does this by seeking to do conceptual justice to the variety of perspectives that exist in the world rather than, as is all too often the case, fixating on only a narrow selection

¹ D. Z. Phillips, *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 158–59. I am aware of the disputes surrounding the appropriate terminology by which to refer to the pre-Columbian inhabitants of the Americas and their descendants. In the absence of any consensus on this issue, I follow certain other scholars in using terms such as “Native American,” “American Indian,” and “Amerindian” interchangeably; cf. Joane Nagel, *American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), xi–xii.

² Cf. Mario von der Ruhr, “Is Animism Alive and Well? A Response to Professor Eldridge,” in *Can Religion Be Explained Away?*, ed. D. Z. Phillips (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 26–45.

of religious concepts while, in many instances, abstracting those concepts from the very lived traditions in which they have their sense.³

As a growing number of critical voices within the philosophy of religion have remarked, the need for an expanded conception of this area of inquiry – a conception that enables and actualizes discussion of a wider range both of religions and of religious phenomena than has standardly been the case – is long overdue.⁴ It is overdue not least because the preoccupation with issues surrounding the rationality of a highly abstracted “theism” promotes an unduly restricted comprehension of religious possibilities. Efforts to broaden the subject are, however, becoming increasingly prominent. By fostering attention to religions other than Christianity and to dimensions of religiosity other than doctrinal belief (construed narrowly in terms of intellectual assent to specific propositions), recent innovations have exemplified paths that might fruitfully be pursued further.⁵ Among the areas that remain underexplored are the forms of religion that are typified by those human communities that have come to be known most commonly as indigenous peoples.⁶

³ For the notion of doing “conceptual justice to the world in all its variety,” see esp. D. Z. Phillips, “Rejoinder,” in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 174–80, at 174; idem, *Religion and Friendly Fire: Examining Assumptions in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 52–53; idem, “Philosophy’s Radical Pluralism in the House of Intellect – A Reply to Henk Vroom,” in *D. Z. Phillips’ Contemplative Philosophy of Religion: Questions and Responses*, ed. Andy F. Sanders (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 197–211, at 207.

⁴ Instances of such voices include Timothy D. Knepper, *The Ends of Philosophy of Religion: Terminus and Telos* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Kevin Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014); Thomas A. Lewis, *Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion – And Vice Versa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); plus some of my own work, such as Mikel Burley, *Rebirth and the Stream of Life: A Philosophical Study of Reincarnation, Karma and Ethics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), esp. 9–11.

⁵ For innovative approaches, see John Clayton, *Religions, Reasons and Gods: Essays in Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Gwen Griffith-Dickson, *The Philosophy of Religion* (London: SCM Press, 2005); Wesley J. Wildman, *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry: Envisioning a Future for the Philosophy of Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010).

⁶ Like “Native Americans,” “indigenous peoples” remains a contested term. Though I shall not in this article be entering into the debate surrounding its use, I accept the point made by other commentators that, far from being treated as “static and rigid,” the meaning of “indigenous” should be recognized as having a degree of context-dependence. Relevant contextual factors include the power relations between those who are categorized as indigenous on the one hand and the “politically dominant group” within a given society on the other (Frans Viljoen, “Reflections on the Legal Protection of Indigenous Peoples’ Rights in Africa,” in *Perspectives on the Rights of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples in Africa*, ed. Solomon Dersso [Pretoria: Pretoria University Law Press, 2010], 75–93, at 78). For a variety of opinions, see Alan Barnard, “Kalahari Revisionism, Vienna and the ‘Indigenous Peoples’ Debate,” *Social Anthropology* 14, no. 1 (2006), 1–16, plus the responses from seven other anthropologists and the rejoinder from Barnard that follow it in the same journal issue. Incidentally, other underexplored areas in the philosophy of religion include New Religious Movements, a notable exception being Morgan Luck, ed., *Philosophical Explorations of New and Alternative Religious Movements* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

Arvind Sharma, in a rare book-length philosophical study of indigenous – or what he terms *primal* – religion, describes philosophy of religion as undergoing a gradual “deprovincialization.”⁷ This has occurred, Sharma observes, as philosophers of religion have examined the major religions of Asia as well as of the Western world. He adds, however, that despite being “present in both the East and the West,” a certain tradition – “namely, the primal religious tradition” – remains neglected in those treatments, “perhaps under the mistaken assumption that this religious tradition has little to offer by way of philosophical reflection.”⁸

Sharma, no doubt, harbors some questionable assumptions of his own. Among these is the assumption that it makes sense to think of indigenous religions as constituting a single religious tradition rather than a multiplicity of more or less variegated traditions. A further assumption on Sharma’s part – embodied in the very structure of his book – is that discussion of indigenous religions can usefully be inserted into a preformed conceptual mold based on an existing list of categories. Instead of looking to see how the effort to engage philosophically with indigenous religions might transform the very parameters of the inquiry, Sharma attempts to shoehorn ideas drawn from indigenous sources into a framework borrowed from a general textbook on the philosophy of religion authored by John Hick.⁹ Thus, while Sharma is to be commended for his intrepid spirit, the end result, as several commentators have noted, leaves much work to be done.¹⁰

In view of the paucity of material on indigenous religions within the philosophy of religion itself, one means of improving upon the kind of project typified by Sharma is to look towards debates in other disciplines. The work of many anthropologists is a fertile resource in this regard, as are certain discussions in the field of religious studies. And among the topics to have generated vibrant debate in these disciplines since the 1990s is that of animism. Having, to a large extent, fallen out of favor among scholars of indigenous religions in the mid-twentieth century, talk of animism has gained fresh approval over recent decades as a means of identifying certain tendencies or “orientations” that are “immanent” in the ways in which

⁷ Arvind Sharma, *A Primal Perspective on the Philosophy of Religion* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), back cover.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Cf. John H. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990).

¹⁰ For critical appraisal of Sharma, see Laura Grillo, “The Urgency of Widening the Discourse of Philosophy of Religion: A Discussion of *A Primal Perspective on the Philosophy of Religion* by Arvind Sharma,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79, no. 4 (2011), 803–13, plus contributions by Mary N. MacDonald and Jeremy H. Smith, respectively, in the same journal issue. Grillo challenges the adoption Hick’s framework especially strongly: “Using Hick’s Christo-centric philosophy as the basis for establishing a comparative philosophy of religion replicates the fundamental error of early works in the history of religions: that is, it makes the implicit assumption that Christianity is the norm against which comparison with the ‘other’ is made” (805).

many indigenous peoples relate to their environment.¹¹ Indeed, some scholars have spoken enthusiastically of a “new animism” that manifests in the “worldviews and lifeways” not only of indigenous peoples but also of Neo-Pagans and environmental activists.¹²

In this article, I take animism as a central concept around which to develop philosophical engagement with indigenous religions. I begin by examining the origins of the concept of animism and its revival in recent and contemporary anthropology and religious studies. I then turn to the treatment of animism by a small number of philosophers, including Phillips and von der Ruhr, to whom I referred above. While the approach that regards animistic talk as illustrative of a particular perspective on the world is helpful as far as it goes, there is a danger of oversimplifying our understanding of that perspective if insufficient attention is paid to the variety of ways in which indigenous peoples interact with their environments. To guard against this danger, I examine the ongoing debate among anthropologists, historians, and other scholars concerning the myth of the “ecologically noble savage,” a phrase first coined by Kent Redford.¹³ As is often the case when a topic is scrutinized carefully, the conclusions to be drawn in relation to this debate are complex. But gesturing towards complexity is itself a helpful lesson for the philosophy of religion; doing so is apt to encourage – at least among those philosophers who wish to participate in the deprovincializing project – an aspiration for further methodological innovation, perhaps including a higher degree of interdisciplinary research.

I. The Concept of Animism: Origins and Revival

The use of the term “animism” to denote a religious orientation is normally traced back to Edward Tylor (1832–1917), who is widely esteemed as the founder, or at any rate one of the

¹¹ I am here borrowing the notions of orientation and immanence from Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000), 112. It should be noted that neither I nor most of the authors I am discussing in this article simply equate indigenous religion with animism. Not all indigenous religions are animistic and not all versions of animism are connected with indigenous religion. As we shall see, Edward Tylor *would* equate the two, but only inasmuch as he equates religion *in general* with animism.

¹² See, e.g., Paul Bouissac, “What Is a Human? Ecological Semiotics and the New Animism,” *Semiotica: Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies* 77, no. 4 (1989), 497–516; Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World*, 2nd ed. (London: Hurst, 2017), esp. chap. 5; Kathryn Rountree, “Neo-Paganism, Animism, and Kinship with Nature,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27, no. 2 (2012), 305–20. The phrase “animist worldviews and lifeways” is one that Harvey uses in, for example, “Things Act: Casual Indigenous Statements about the Performance of Object-Persons,” in *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief*, ed. Marion Bowman and Ülo Valk (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012), 194–210, at 194; *Animism*, passim.

¹³ Kent H. Redford, “The Ecologically Noble Savage,” *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1991), 46–48.

principal founders, of the discipline of anthropology in the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Tylor himself derived the term “animism” from earlier uses, notably its application in the eighteenth century by the German chemist and physician Georg Ernst Stahl,¹⁵ who “explained life and disease by the action of a ‘sensitive soul,’ or *anima*, which inhabited every part of the organism and prevented its spontaneous putrefaction.”¹⁶ Transposing the term from the medical to the religious and cultural domain, Tylor deployed it to indicate the ascription of “personality and life” not merely to animals and human beings but also to “what we call inanimate objects,” such as “rivers, stones, trees, weapons, and so forth.”¹⁷ For Tylor, animism was more than some relatively marginal religious attitude; construed concisely as “the deep-lying doctrine of Spiritual Beings,” it constituted the essential characteristic of religion tout court.¹⁸

Animism was viewed by Tylor as the very “groundwork of the Philosophy of Religion, from that of savages up to that of civilized men,” adding that “although it may at first seem to afford but a bare and meagre definition of a minimum of religion, it will be found practically sufficient; for where the root is, the branches will generally be produced.”¹⁹ Tylor is here using the term “philosophy” in a broad sense, to mean a kind of system or worldview, “of which belief is the theory and worship is the practice.”²⁰ He is thus conceiving of philosophy of religion not as a branch of academic inquiry, but as an approach to the world that is distinctively religious or spiritual.²¹ Despite acknowledging that animism, and hence religion, comprises practical as well as doxastic elements, Tylor’s insistence that it is specifically *belief* in spiritual beings that is essential to religion has earned him a reputation for being

¹⁴ Nurit Bird-David, “‘Animism’ Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology,” *Current Anthropology* 40 (Supplement) (1999), 67–79, at 69; George W. Stocking, *Delimiting Anthropology: Occasional Essays and Reflections* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 105; Julia Reid, “Archaeology and Anthropology,” in *The Routledge Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century British Literature and Science*, ed. John Holmes and Sharon Ruston (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 357–71, at 363.

¹⁵ Georg Ernst Stahl, *Theoria medica vera: physiologiam et pathologiam*, 2nd ed. (Halle: Literis Orphanotropei, 1737), cited in Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom*, 2 vols, 6th ed. (London: Murray, 1920 [1st ed., 1871]), vol. 1, 425–26, fn. 1.

¹⁶ Erwin H. Ackerknecht, *A Short History of Medicine*, rev. ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 128. For more on Stahl’s animism, see Lester S. King, “Stahl and Hoffmann: A Study in Eighteenth Century Animism,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 19, no. 2 (1964), 118–30.

¹⁷ Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, vol. 1, 477.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 425. Tylor, famously, adopts “belief in Spiritual Beings” as his “minimum definition of Religion” (*ibid.*, 424). Hence, by identifying animism with the “doctrine of Spiritual Beings,” he effectively equates animism with religion, or at least with religion’s “essential source” (*ibid.*).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 426.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 427.

²¹ We might say that, in Tylor’s usage, “of religion” constitutes the subjective or active genitive (implying the philosophy that *belongs to religion*) rather than the objective or passive genitive (implying that religion is what is being treated as an object of study *by philosophy*).

“intellectualistic.”²² He tends to treat religion, with animism as its foundation, as essentially a primitive – and ultimately a mistaken – theory about the world. Notwithstanding its tenacious presence in the more instinctive moments even of modern “civilized” life, animism, for Tylor, represents a “childish stage” of the human mind’s development.²³ According to the evolutionary model to which Tylor subscribed, this immature stage inevitably succumbs in the long run to scientific ways of thinking, which are deemed to be intellectually superior.

It is in large measure these associations with a condescending evolutionary conception of human cognitive development that led, over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, to a reluctance on the part of anthropologists, and indeed philosophers, to use the term “animism.”²⁴ In more recent decades, however, “animism” has been reclaimed as a non-pejorative designator, both by certain anthropologists and scholars of religion on the one hand and, on the other hand, by certain indigenous and other people who wish to identify themselves as animists. In some instances, to highlight the difference, Tylor’s conception has been labelled “old” animism in contrast with the revised and more politically respectable “new” or “neo-” animism,²⁵ though in many instances these qualifying prefixes are omitted.

Recent advocates of the viability of the concept of animism in the study of indigenous peoples frequently look to work in the mid-twentieth century by the anthropologist Irving Hallowell as a precursor and source of inspiration.²⁶ In his writings on the Ojibwe people of southern Canada, Hallowell is careful not to treat them as animists in what he regards as the “dogmatic” sense, which would signify a people who indiscriminately “attribute living souls to inanimate objects such as stones.”²⁷ Rather, Hallowell views the Ojibwe as recognizing

²² Paul Radin, “Introduction to the Torchbook Edition,” in Edward Burnett Tylor, *Religion in Primitive Culture* (New York: Harper, 1958), ix–xvii, at xi.

²³ Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, vol. 1, 286.

²⁴ “To call any philosophy Animism is to condemn it. The word usually refers to an early level of man’s thinking about the world, a level in which our distinction between animate and the inanimate had not yet been made” (Elmo A. Robinson, “Animism as a World Hypothesis,” *Philosophical Review* 58, no. 1 [1949], 53–63, at 54). See also Kees W. Bolle, “Animism and Animatism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 296–302; John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 8.

²⁵ For “new animism,” see, inter alia, Kaj Århem, “Southeast Asian Animism in Context,” in *Animism in Southeast Asia*, ed. Kaj Århem and Guido Sprenger (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 3–30, at 6; Anselm Franke, “Much Trouble in the Transportation of Souls, or: The Sudden Disorganization of Boundaries,” in *Animism*, ed. Anselm Franke, vol. 1 (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 11–53, at 13; Paul-François Tremlett, Liam T. Sutherland, and Graham Harvey, “Introduction: Why Tylor, Why Now?” in *Edward Burnett Tylor, Religion and Culture*, ed. Paul-François Tremlett, Graham Harvey, and Liam T. Sutherland (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 1–7, at 4. For “neo-animism,” see, e.g., Signe Howell, “Metamorphosis and Identity: Chewong Animistic Ontology,” in *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, ed. Graham Harvey (Durham: Acumen, 2013), 101–12, at 105.

²⁶ See, e.g., Harvey, *Animism*, 17.

²⁷ A. Irving Hallowell, “Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View,” in *Culture in History: Essays in Honor of Paul Radin*, ed. Stanley Diamond (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 19–52, at 24–25.

“potentialities for animation in certain classes of objects under certain circumstances”; whether these potentialities are understood to have been actualized will depend on the forms of behavior displayed by particular objects belonging to the relevant class. Thus, for example, the Ojibwe do not regard all stones as being alive, but they do regard some of them as being so, notably those that have been perceived to move apparently of their own accord.²⁸ In some instances, the Ojibwe will even claim to be able to have a two-way conversation with a stone, thereby indicating “that not only animate properties but even ‘person’ attributes may be projected upon objects which to us clearly belong to a physical inanimate category.”²⁹

Hallowell’s talk of attributes being *projected* might be taken to imply that he considers there to be something erroneous or purely imaginary about the Ojibwe’s ascription of personal characteristics to what are, “to us,” inanimate objects. But on the whole Hallowell deliberately tries to avoid giving that impression, maintaining instead that a comprehensive understanding of another culture requires an effort to refrain from imposing on it a set of “categorical abstractions derived from Western thought.”³⁰ Rather, he insists, we should strive to adopt “a world view perspective,” which consists in seeing how the various conceptual strands of a given cultural system cohere together without privileging our own way of viewing things as necessarily normative.

Unlike Hallowell, certain theorists have followed Tylor in assuming that “animistic thinking” incorporates “fallacious reasoning” that leads to “‘illogical’ behaviour” such as the performance of sacrifices in the hope of persuading the natural environment to give one something in return.³¹ One way of trying to explain the origins of such purportedly misguided reasoning has been to devise evolutionary psychological theories, which speculate that, in the distant past, it would have been advantageous to human survival to ascribe life and anthropomorphic characteristics to various natural phenomena regardless of whether the phenomena really possess them. Supposedly, these ascriptions would have been advantageous because they instantiate a precautionary principle, which might be encapsulated in the phrase “better safe than sorry”: assuming that something is alive or humanlike enables evasive action to be taken, whereas waiting until one is certain about its nature is liable, in many instances, to put one at risk.³²

Against this line of argument, it has been pointed out that the entities and phenomena to which animist peoples attribute life and personhood are not generally, let alone exclusively,

²⁸ Ibid., 25.

²⁹ Ibid., 26.

³⁰ Ibid., 21.

³¹ Nicholas Humphrey, “The Social Function of Intellect,” in *Growing Points in Ethology*, ed. P. P. G. Bateson and R. A. Hinde (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 303–17, at 313.

³² Stewart Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), esp. 4–5.

those with which they are least familiar or about which they have the greatest degree of uncertainty. On the contrary, it tends to be precisely in relation to those features of the world that are best known to them that such peoples' expressions of animism are strongest. If, as the evolutionary theory supposes, human cognitive development has comprised a series of retrospective acknowledgments of earlier animistic mistakes, then, as the anthropologist Nurit Bird-David has contended, the theory remains dubious; for even on the most charitable reading it leaves unanswered the question of why animist peoples "culturally endorse and elaborate these 'mistakes.'" Worse than that, however, it insinuates that the cognitive capacities of indigenous people are inferior to those of most animals, since it maintains that even amphibians are able to see their mistake after reacting to an inorganic object as though it possessed animate qualities (albeit that they are prone to react similarly next time).³³

Bird-David is among the anthropologists who, in the footsteps of Hallowell, view animism not as a childish or otherwise underdeveloped way of comprehending the world, but as embodying alternative ontological and epistemological perspectives.³⁴ Drawing upon her own fieldwork among the Nayaka, a small forager community in southern India, Bird-David contrasts animistic (or *relational*) epistemology with epistemology of a modern Western (or *modernist*) strain. To illustrate the difference between these, Bird-David characterizes the modernist approach as one that, drawing a sharp distinction between the knower and the known, tends to objectify that which is to be known and to analyze it into its component parts. When studying a forest, for example, botanists who deploy a modernist epistemology are apt to chop some specimen trees into pieces and divide the pieces into distinct types, which are then transported to a herbarium to be classified. By contrast, the Nayaka means of knowing would involve talking with trees, where "talking with" encompasses activities that might include "singing, dancing, or socializing in other ways." "To 'talk with a tree' – rather than 'cut it down' – is," Bird-David proposes, "to perceive what *it* does as one acts towards it, being aware concurrently of changes in oneself and the tree. It is expecting response and responding, growing into mutual responsiveness and, furthermore, possibly into mutual responsibility."³⁵

This notion of an epistemology, in the sense of a way of learning with and about one's environment, shades into the notion of an ontology, where the latter term is used to denote a way of conceptualizing the entities that constitute the world. Both the animistic epistemology and the animistic ontology are facets of a conception of community as comprising more than just the human inhabitants of a region: in effect, the region itself amounts to "a local heterogeneous community whose members cooperate with or accommodate themselves to

³³ Bird-David, "'Animism' Revisited," 71.

³⁴ Ibid., 77–79. See also various publications by Tim Ingold, esp. *The Perception of the Environment*. A concise discussion of Bird-David vis-à-vis Ingold is included in Århem, "Southeast Asian Animism in Context," 9–11.

³⁵ Bird-David, "'Animism' Revisited," 77.

one another.”³⁶ To designate the mode of existence characteristic of such communities, Bird-David coins the term *pluripresence*, by which she means to indicate a mutual togetherness shared by multiple beings of diverse species within a community small enough in geographical spread to facilitate “the vivid availability” of all members to one another.³⁷

As is suggested by her talk of cooperation and “mutual responsibility,” Bird-David perceives relational epistemology as also carrying certain ethical implications. Indeed, the idea that animism is tightly bound up with attitudes of solidarity with, and respect towards, nonhuman species and the environment as a whole is pervasive in the contemporary literature. It is frequently accompanied by the insinuation that animism, far from being of mere academic interest as one among many possible ways of relating to the world, is to be admired and celebrated as a way that is ethically and ecologically superior to others.³⁸ Though understandable, such admiration risks providing an oversimplified and hence distorted picture of the heterogeneous category of indigenous peoples, a risk that I shall explore later in this article. In the next two sections, however, I turn to some of the few instances in which animism and indigenous religiosity more generally have been discussed in specifically philosophical contexts.

II. Animism, Indigeneity, and the Philosophy of Religion

As I noted in this article’s introduction, discussion of indigenous religions has for the most part been conspicuous by its absence in the philosophy of religion. When such religions have been referred to at all – either by the term “indigenous” or by others, such as “primal” or “primitive” – it has often been precisely in order to clear the path for a discussion that ignores

³⁶ Nurit Bird-David, *Us, Relatives: Scaling and Plural Life in a Forager World* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 174.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 21. Bird-David refers to “pluripresence” as a neologism (*ibid.*, xiv), but the word has in fact existed since the late eighteenth century, albeit with a different meaning. James Boswell quotes Samuel Johnson as asserting that the Roman Catholic invocation of saints implies not their omnipresence (i.e., presence everywhere) but only their pluripresence (i.e., presence in multiple places at once); James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, vol. 2 (London: Murray, 1831 [1791]), 240.

³⁸ This celebratory posture is most obvious in the work of Graham Harvey, who not only speaks unapologetically as a proponent (rather than a mere scholar) of animism, but contends that the new animism, unlike the old, actively invites academics “to participate more fully” in “the living world” (*Animism*, 212). Harvey’s allegedly confessional stance has resulted in his being dubbed a “new primitivist” (Jan Platvoet, “Beyond ‘Primitivism’: ‘Indigenous Religions’,” *AASR Bulletin* 21 [2004], 47–52, at 52) and a “theological animist” (James Cox, *From Primitive to Indigenous: The Academic Study of Indigenous Religions* [Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007], 161–63). Ingold, too, often implies that animist ontologies and epistemologies afford not merely a different but a more accurate account of reality than do certain Western ones; see, e.g., Tim Ingold, “Comments,” *Current Anthropology* 40 (Supplement) (1999), 81–82, and remarks on Ingold in Århem, “Southeast Asian Animism in Context,” 10.

them. For instance, in the introduction to his *Philosophy of Religion*, John Hick, having acknowledged that the concept of religion is probably best construed as a “family resemblance” concept in Wittgenstein’s sense of this phrase, then proceeds to draw a distinction between two broad categories of religion. On the one hand are those that Hick terms “the great developed world faiths,” which exhibit a prominent interest in personal “salvation or liberation”; on the other hand are what Hick lumps together into the category of “‘primitive’ or ‘archaic’ religion, which is more concerned with keeping things on an even keel, avoiding catastrophe.”³⁹ Since it is the quest for salvation, characterized in terms of “the transition from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness” on which Hick is chiefly focused,⁴⁰ the indigenous religions, which he uncritically assumes to be unconcerned with issues of salvation, get left aside.⁴¹ Subsequently, in his *An Interpretation of Religion*, Hick acknowledges that he has given less attention to “primal religion” than it deserves, though here he excuses this lacuna by remarking that the book aims to provide only a preliminary rather than a definitive inquiry. The onus, he says, is on those who “find this approach inadequate or misleading” to develop their own.⁴²

In other cases, consideration of indigenous religions has been omitted on account of their lacking a clear connection with the Western philosophical tradition. For instance, in laying out the parameters of their five-volume edited series on *The History of Western Philosophy of Religion*, Graham Oppy and Nick Trakakis note that they have based their decision to exclude entries on thinkers from “the non-Western world,” including “the Asian, African and indigenous philosophical and religious traditions,” “primarily on the (admittedly not incontestable) view that [those traditions] have not had a great impact on the main historical narrative of the West.”⁴³ Given the series’ explicit focus on specifically Western philosophy of religion, this editorial decision is perhaps defensible. But the very fact that Western philosophy of religion has, according to these editors, managed to avoid engaging to any serious extent with Asian, African, and indigenous traditions tells a poignant story in itself.

A further perceived obstacle to incorporating indigenous religions into philosophical discussions is the predominance of oral over literary modes of communication in indigenous societies. Thus, in a chapter on “Religion and Global Ethics,” Joseph Runzo-Inada, while

³⁹ Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 3.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ More nuanced discussions of soteriology in relation to indigenous religions distinguish between “this-worldly” and “other-worldly” conceptions of salvation (Sharma, *A Primal Perspective on the Philosophy of Religion*, 12), thereby opening up conceptual space for talk of indigenous soteriologies that aim “at securing benefits in this world rather than in a life after death” (Cox, *From Primitive to Indigenous*, 63).

⁴² John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), xiii.

⁴³ Graham Oppy and N. N. Trakakis, “Editorial Introduction,” in *The History of Western Philosophy of Religion Volume 5: Twentieth-Century Philosophy of Religion* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), vii–ix, at vii.

recognizing the importance of indigenous religious ethics, especially in connection with environmental issues, opts to concentrate on “the world religions” that, “unlike indigenous oral traditions,” “have philosophical religious texts which facilitate comparisons in ethics.”⁴⁴

There have, of course, been exceptions to the general disregard of indigenous religions by philosophers, some of which I have mentioned already in this article. Aside from Sharma’s monograph, one such exception takes the form of an exchange on the question “Is Animism Alive and Well?” between Richard Eldridge and Mario von der Ruhr plus a subsequent endorsement of von der Ruhr’s position by D. Z. Phillips.⁴⁵ The contributions of these philosophers are important inasmuch as they exhibit ways of avoiding the kinds of hasty marginalization of indigenous traditions exemplified by Hick, Oppy and Trakakis, and Runzo-Inada. By offering potential points of connection with anthropological literature, some of which I briefly surveyed in the previous section, these philosophical treatments, while being limited in their own ways, open up possibilities of interdisciplinary inquiry that warrant critical attention and augmentation.

Central to the argument that Eldridge develops is the contention that while “traditional, more animistic cultures and practices,” on the one hand, and “modern, scientific, materialist cultures and practices,” on the other, both “express persistent human interests and responses to reality,” they nonetheless display significant differences.⁴⁶ Following suggestions from figures such as Wittgenstein and the anthropologist Robin Horton, Eldridge makes a distinction analogous to the one that we have seen Bird-David making between modernist and animist ways of relating to the world. As Eldridge puts it, modern materialist cultures are disposed to encourage attempts to control nature, satisfy material desires, and cultivate power, whereas traditional cultures generally accentuate “the expression of a sense of human ensoulment and resonance with nature, thus leading to what Horton calls ‘an intensely poetic quality in everyday life’.”⁴⁷ Eldridge maintains that, despite the divergences between these general orientations, the poetic quality to which Horton alludes retains a place, perhaps an ineradicable place, in all human life, such that it may be apposite to speak of “a natural poetry of being.”⁴⁸

Versions of the thought that vestiges of animistic or other supposedly premodern modes of response to the world persist in modern societies occur frequently in early literature on

⁴⁴ Joseph Runzo-Inada, “Religion and Global Ethics,” in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Chad Meister and Paul Copan, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 700–11, at 700.

⁴⁵ Richard Eldridge, “Is Animism Alive and Well?” in *Can Religion Be Explained Away?*, ed. D. Z. Phillips (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 3–25; von der Ruhr, “Is Animism Alive and Well?”; Phillips, *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, chap. 6.

⁴⁶ Eldridge, “Is Animism Alive and Well?,” 21.

⁴⁷ Ibid., quoting Robin Horton, “African Traditional Thought and Western Science,” in *Rationality*, ed. Bryan R. Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970), 131–71, at 170.

⁴⁸ Eldridge, “Is Animism Alive and Well?,” 12.

indigenous religions. Tylor himself was sympathetic to the idea that even “full-grown civilized Europeans” are, for example, prone to react to inanimate objects as they might to purposive agents, especially in moments of passion, such as when, in anger, we lash out at an object that has caused us physical pain.⁴⁹ Several decades later, Wittgenstein, in connection with a comparable observation of his own, proposed that reminding ourselves of these instinctive levels of reaction can satisfy (or perhaps supplant) our desire for an explanation of certain religious rites: the reminders help us to see that, analogously, rites may be expressing something deeply human without their needing to be based on a theory or belief (purportedly held by the participants) that the ritual action will bring about some practical result.⁵⁰ In this respect, Wittgenstein’s thought runs counter to that of Tylor, who would have regarded the instinctive reactions to which Wittgenstein is referring as themselves manifestations of a residual, and erroneous, belief.

Eldridge’s intimation that there is something specifically poetic about animistic ways of thinking and behaving echoes (or anticipates) suggestions from Brian Clack, who borrows from Goethe the phrase “poetry of life” (*die Poesie des Lebens*) to express the thought that much of what, in modern life, gets derided as superstition may be seen to possess “a curious depth.”⁵¹ One of Clack’s examples, derived from the work of James Frazer, is that of the Cambodian King of Fire, who was said by the local community to own a sword containing a spirit “who guards it constantly and works miracles with it.”⁵² The legend surrounding the sword declares the sword’s spirit to be that of a slave who, having accidentally spilt some of his own blood on the blade as it was being forged, “died a voluntary death to expiate his involuntary offence.” The destructive power of the sword is said to be such that the King’s unsheathing it even partially would result in the sun becoming hidden and people and animals falling unconscious; if he were to withdraw it fully from the scabbard, “the world would come to an end.”⁵³ Commenting on this example, Clack observes that an excessively rationalistic interpretation would assume that a false conception of causality is in play, whereas adopting a different perspective might disclose something more profound. Instead of

⁴⁹ Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, vol. 1, 286.

⁵⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*,” in *Philosophical Occasions, 1912–1951*, ed. James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1993), 115–55, at 137–38.

⁵¹ Brian R. Clack, “D. Z. Phillips, Wittgenstein and Religion,” *Religious Studies* 31, no. 1 (1995), 111–201, at 114. For Goethe’s original use of the phrase, see Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections*, trans. Elisabeth Stopp, ed. Peter Hutchinson (London: Penguin, 1998), 20, maxim no. 171.

⁵² Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3rd ed., Pt. 1: *The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings*, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1911), 5.

⁵³ Ibid. Frazer’s account is based on reports from nineteenth-century French expeditions to the Central Highlands that cover the border area between modern-day Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. For a more recent ethnographically informed account, see Oscar Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam’s Central Highlanders: A Historical Contextualization, 1850–1990* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), esp. chap. 8.

fixating on the error of supposing that a sword could have the magical power attributed to it, Clack recommends reflecting upon “the fascination that envelops us when we entertain the possibility that it *might*”; in doing so, “We may come to recognise the essentially poetic nature of such acts.”⁵⁴

Inviting us to perceive certain customs or practices under the aspect of poetry is a means of freeing us from the temptation to dismiss them as products of ignorance or confusion. Just as it would show a misunderstanding to conflate poetic utterances with, say, scientific hypotheses, so, according to the view exemplified by Eldridge and Clack, it would show a misunderstanding of practices imbued with animistic or magical elements to conflate them with straightforwardly instrumental styles of reasoning. What needs to be cultivated by the philosopher, or by any other prospective interpreter, is a sensitivity to the *distinctive character* of the modes of discourse in question and, as Hallowell among many others has urged, an alertness to the dangers of hearing that discourse through the potentially distorting filter of “categorical abstractions” imposed from outside.⁵⁵

For someone such as Mario von der Ruhr, who, like Eldridge and Clack, has been influenced by the philosophical thought of Wittgenstein, there is little here with which to take issue. Although von der Ruhr’s response to Eldridge’s discussion does contain several points of disagreement, he remains sympathetic to its overall tenor.⁵⁶ In the following section, I shall not focus on the points of disagreement, since doing so would require entering into the minutiae of both Eldridge’s and von der Ruhr’s essays in more depth than is suitable for my purposes in this article. Rather, I shall concentrate on how von der Ruhr provides additional “illustrative detail to bring out what might be meant by saying that an attitude towards nature is animistic,”⁵⁷ and especially on the point, made by von der Ruhr and seconded by Phillips, that care is needed not to presume that the only alternative to a literalistic reading of what this could mean is a purely metaphorical one. It is by becoming aware of other ways of listening to the voices of indigenous peoples that new pathways are exposed for a deprovincialized philosophy of religion.

III. *Beyond Literalism and Metaphor*

⁵⁴ Clack, “D. Z. Phillips, Wittgenstein and Religion,” 114.

⁵⁵ For talk of the importance of noting “*the distinctive character*” (original emphasis) of different modes of discourse or “linguistic practices,” see the exposition of Wittgenstein’s philosophical methods in Brian R. Clack, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s Philosophy of Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 51. For talk of “categorical abstractions derived from Western thought,” see Hallowell, “Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View,” 21, quoted earlier.

⁵⁶ Von der Ruhr, “Is Animism Alive and Well?,” 27.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 27–28.

As a point of contrast with suggestions outlined in the previous section, we might note that those who have been eager that animism *not* be thought of in terms of poetry include Tylor. He maintained that when “the lower tribes of man” speak of the “sun and stars, trees and rivers, winds and clouds” as beings who not only have lives comparable to those of humans, but fulfil “their special functions in the universe with the aid of limbs like beasts or of artificial instruments like men,” the basis of these ideas ought not to be reduced “to poetic fancy and transformed metaphor.” Rather, the “philosophy of nature” on which the ideas rest, though “early and crude,” is nonetheless “thoughtful, consistent, and quite really and seriously meant.”⁵⁸ In assertions such as this we see a dichotomy between poetic or metaphorical meaning on the one hand and earnest or sincere meaning on the other. The dichotomy is questionable, given that there is no reason why a form of words could not be both metaphorical and seriously meant. Yet there is also an important point that Tylor is making, which is that it would indeed be misleading to regard articulations of animistic beliefs as “merely” metaphorical if this were understood to mean that the beliefs are not genuinely held. What should be noted – and what Tylor does not quite acknowledge – is that a rejection of this reading of animism as mere metaphor need not entail a simplistic literalism, which assumes that rocks and trees and rivers are being spoken of as alive and conscious in exactly the same sense as human beings are. We should not take it for granted that we know perfectly well what it amounts to for animistic expressions to be “really and seriously meant,” and nor should we presume that this amounts to the same thing in every case. Seeing what it does amount to will require attention to the expressions themselves amid the broader cultural surroundings in which they have their place. I take this to be the central point that von der Ruhr is making in his essay, and his means of fleshing it out is to discuss certain exemplary passages from an anthology of Native American textual sources.

The passages adduced by von der Ruhr are ones that accentuate an attitude of reverence for the natural environment and disgust at its mistreatment by the white settlers of European descent. For example, he quotes a Wintu woman’s lamentation that unlike the American Indians, who “never hurt anything,” white people plough up the land, displacing rocks and felling trees. The trees and rocks protest “Don’t. I am sore. Don’t hurt me,” but the white people persist in their destructive ways; as a consequence, “The spirit of the land hates them.”⁵⁹ Complementing the Wintu woman’s lament is an affirmation by the Stoney Indian, Walking Buffalo (1871–1967), that trees talk to one another and to people, provided one is willing to listen. While the trees have taught him much – about the weather, animals, and the

⁵⁸ Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, vol. 1, 285.

⁵⁹ Dorothy Lee, *Freedom and Culture* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1959), 163–64, quoted in von der Ruhr, “Is Animism Alive and Well?,” 28, from T. C. McLuhan, *Touch the Earth: A Self-Portrait of Indian Existence* (London: Abacus, 1980), 15. Here and subsequently, I shall cite the original source in those instances when I have consulted it. Lee attributes this particular pronouncement to “An old Wintu woman, speaking in prophetic vein” (*Freedom and Culture*, 163).

“Great Spirit” – the problem with the white people is that they refuse to listen, whether to Indians or “to other voices in nature.”⁶⁰

If remarks of the sort exemplified by the Wintu woman and by Walking Buffalo are heard in the light of a rudimentary division between literal (or “realist”) and metaphorical (or “nonrealist”) meaning, then, von der Ruhr argues, they are prone to appear “either ridiculous or cheap, *saying* either too much to be intelligible, or too little to convey the meaning intended.”⁶¹ They would appear ridiculous and extravagant if assumed to be asserting that trees and rocks (“literally,” “really”) speak or cry out in pain just as human beings do; and they would appear cheap and insubstantial if assumed to be merely metaphorical, for they do not say enough to make clear what the force of the metaphor is supposed to be. Does, for example, talk of listening to the voices of trees come to anything more than the suggestion that one may discern that an animal is nearby, or that the wind is blowing, by listening to the leaves of a tree rustling? Von der Ruhr admits that the notion of metaphor that is pertinent to the literal–metaphorical dichotomy is, in itself, somewhat narrow, for it presupposes the translatability of metaphors into non-metaphorical terms without loss of meaning.⁶² While this may be feasible in the case of some metaphors, it is unlikely to be feasible in the case of all. But, for the sake of argument, von der Ruhr is willing to go along with that conception of metaphors, since it is the one assumed by those theorists, such as Frazer and (as we have seen) Tylor, who suppose there to be a basic binary opposition here: either something is sincerely meant or it is merely metaphorical whimsy.

The third possibility that both von der Ruhr and Phillips want to foreground is that the remarks of Native Americans about trees and rocks and other features of the environment *show* us something: they “reveal a distinctive attitude towards nature” in a form of words that could not simply be translated into other terms without falling short of expressing the attitude at issue.⁶³ Again, in this respect they are comparable to the words of a poem: not in the sense that they could be dispensed with and replaced by a strictly “literal” paraphrase, but precisely in the sense that they are indispensable. To quote Phillips again, “we are offered a language in which to think of the world,” a language through which we are enabled to comprehend how the earth and trees can be seen as having “a certain spiritual status” that “is internally related to, or constitutive of, what one takes the earth and the trees to be.”⁶⁴ What this contention certainly does not entail is that the language or mode of discourse that we are being offered constitutes what some philosophers would call a “conceptual scheme” that is entirely incommensurable with any modern Western way of viewing the world. Mutual

⁶⁰ Grant MacEwan, *Tatanga Mani: Walking Buffalo of the Stonies* (Edmonton, AB: Hurtig, 1969), 181, quoted in von der Ruhr, “Is Animism Alive and Well?,” 28, from McLuhan, *Touch the Earth*, 23.

⁶¹ Von der Ruhr, “Is Animism Alive and Well?,” 30.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 44, n. 10.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶⁴ Phillips, *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, 158–59.

understanding between those who speak in animistic terms and those who do not is not being precluded. The point is that arriving at a deep understanding of the words at issue will not be achievable without acquiring far more than a superficial appreciation of the other's perspective on the world. The words themselves provide a point of entry into that perspective, but they must be situated within the broader framework of a form of life. To the extent that we are able to enter into the perspective in question – not in the sense of coming to share it ourselves but in the sense of coming to see more clearly what it would be to share it – we enrich our appreciation of how the world might be comprehended differently, how different concepts might be adopted or those that we already have might be embellished or modified. In short, we come to see different “possibilities of sense” or “possibilities of meaning.”⁶⁵ This, as I have argued elsewhere, is an important goal for philosophy of religion to pursue, not least because it facilitates a deep “cultural self-critique” – a critical perspective on the taken-for-granted beliefs and values in one's own culture and on the prejudices through which one may be viewing the world.⁶⁶

To fill out the framework in which the animistic talk of Native Americans occurs, von der Ruhr quotes further passages from the anthology upon which he is drawing. He quotes, for instance, Big Thunder (c. 1900) of the Abenaki nation, who refers to the Great Spirit as “our father” and the earth as “our mother.” The latter is a source of nourishment, for “that which we put into the ground she returns to us, and healing plants she gives us likewise.”⁶⁷ To elaborate this sense of the earth as mother, von der Ruhr quotes an Oglala Lakota chief named Luther Standing Bear (1868–1939) and a spiritual leader of the Wanapum people named Smohalla (“Dreamer,” c. 1815–1895). Standing Bear recounts how the Lakota people loved being close to the earth, to its “mothering power.” “The soil was soothing, strengthening, cleansing, and healing. That is why the old Indian still sits upon the earth instead of propping himself up and away from its life-giving forces.”⁶⁸ Smohalla, in a passage that has been widely quoted elsewhere, rejects the forms of labor imposed upon his people by the Euro-Americans, labor that involves ploughing the land, digging for ore and cutting grass to make hay:

⁶⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 23: “For that is what I am interested in – possibilities of sense – it is these which inspire the wonder which is an essential part of philosophical enquiry.” See also *ibid.*, 157, on the need to avoid stipulating what religious activities “*must* mean” and thereby “obscuring possibilities of meaning.”

⁶⁶ I have broached the theme of philosophy of religion as “cultural critique” in papers presented at the University of Macau (November 2017) and University of Edinburgh (January 2018). It will be developed further in my forthcoming monograph, *Expanding Philosophy of Religion: A Radical Pluralist Approach*.

⁶⁷ Natalie Curtis, *The Indians' Book: An Offering by the American Indians of Indian Lore, Musical and Narrative, to form a Record of the Songs and Legends of Their Race*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper, 1923), 11, quoted in von der Ruhr, “Is Animism Alive and Well?,” 31, from McLuhan, *Touch the Earth*, 22.

⁶⁸ Luther Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (Boston, MA: Houghton-Mifflin, 1933), 192, quoted in von der Ruhr, “Is Animism Alive and Well?,” 31, from McLuhan, *Touch the Earth*, 6.

You ask me to plow the ground. Shall I take a knife and tear my mother's breast? Then when I die she will not take me to her bosom to rest. You ask me to dig for stone. Shall I dig under her skin for her bones? ... You ask me to cut grass and make hay How dare I cut off my mother's hair?⁶⁹

We might note in passing that the numerous places where this passage has been quoted include a work of analytic moral philosophy by Angelika Krebs, who cites it to illustrate the "position" that nature in its entirety is sentient. To refute this "position," Krebs observes that the ground does not groan or tremble when, for instance, farmers plough their fields, just as the sea does not respond in these ways when someone rows a boat upon it. Since, then, neither the earth nor the sea displays the requisite behavioral criteria for the correct application of the concept of pain, Krebs concludes (without irony) that "[t]he claim that either feels pain is, thus, false."⁷⁰ Regrettably, this use of an Amerindian's words, lacking any attempt to contextualize them within the broader worldview of the Wanapum or other indigenous peoples of the Columbia Plateau from which they originate, is not untypical of much Western philosophy. It is precisely this decontextualizing propensity, which demonstrates a tin ear for language that is religiously or otherwise culturally inflected, that philosophers such as Phillips and von der Ruhr are resisting.

For von der Ruhr's part, he goes a long way towards contextualizing certain Native American expressions of an animistic bent by assembling illustrative textual excerpts. By integrating those excerpts into his overall discussion, von der Ruhr effectively does what he accuses James Frazer of not doing, namely expounding "the 'grammar' of the vocabulary" that is employed by the peoples being studied.⁷¹ Still, however, there is room for critical reflection upon the agenda that remains only implicit in von der Ruhr's selection of examples. No such selection can hope to be fully comprehensive, and hence there are choices to be made about, as it were, the story one wishes to tell by means of the examples. It is notable that von der Ruhr's examples of Native American modes of discourse are all derived from a single anthology. Although the compiler of that anthology, Teri McLuhan, has herself gathered the passages from diverse sources, she has patently done so with a specific purpose in mind. As

⁶⁹ McLuhan, *Touch the Earth*, 56, quoted in von der Ruhr, "Is Animism Alive and Well?," 31. McLuhan cites as her source Samuel G. Drake, *Biography and History of the Indians of North America*, 3rd ed. (Boston, MA: Perkins and Hilliard, Gray & Co., 1834), but neither this nor any other quotation from Smohalla occurs in that book. The earliest published occurrence of the passage is in James Mooney, *The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1896), 721, in which it is derived from a transcription by Major J. W. MacMurray dated 1884. That transcription, though not identical to the version that appears in McLuhan's anthology, differs only very slightly (e.g., "tear my mother's breast" reads instead "tear my mother's bosom").

⁷⁰ Angelika Krebs, *Ethics of Nature: A Map* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999), 85.

⁷¹ Von der Ruhr, "Is Animism Alive and Well?," 35.

an extract from a review in *The Toronto Star*, quoted on the opening page of the anthology, remarks, “It’s a religious and poetic work whose object is to draw attention to the lasting beauty and truth of the best of Indian tradition.”⁷² And as McLuhan herself admits, “This is not a scholarly book”;⁷³ it makes no pretense to academic rigor. We should therefore not expect to find in the anthology a balanced assortment of excerpts, but rather, to borrow a phrase from Wittgenstein, “a one-sided diet.”⁷⁴

In von der Ruhr’s selection, the diet becomes even more one-sided: a distillation of a distillation, designed to illustrate the solemn and reverential attitude displayed by many Native Americans towards the environment they inhabit and with which they feel a deep affinity.⁷⁵ There is nothing wrong with seeking to bring out this particular aspect of Native American culture, and hence neither is there anything necessarily suspect about von der Ruhr’s choice of examples. A danger of oversimplification and essentialization emerges, however, when the heterogeneity of Native American attitudes and ways of being is lost sight of and the recognition of plurality is replaced by a monolithic representation. “For the Indian,” von der Ruhr writes at one point, “it was essential to be in close contact with the earth and everything on it.”⁷⁶ While this may be a viable starting point for analysis, it is little more than that; and the notion of “the Indian” that it invokes harbors an implicit idealization. Some Native Americans themselves have invoked such idealizations, just as they have endorsed a binary opposition between “the Indian” or “the Red man” on the one hand and “the White man” on the other.⁷⁷ In the words of Vine Deloria, Jr. (1933–2005), a well-known Lakota author and campaigner for Native American rights, “The Indian lived with his land. *The white destroyed his land. He destroyed the planet earth.*”⁷⁸ In the light of the sustained persecution suffered by many Native Americans since the arrival of Europeans in the late fifteenth century, the motivation for such pronouncements is understandable. But the language is strategically rhetorical in nature, intended to advance the interests of indigenous peoples against non-indigenous encroachments. It is not the language of nonpartisan philosophical reflection.

⁷² The review is from *The Toronto Star*, December 19, 1973, p. A8.

⁷³ McLuhan, *Touch the Earth*, 2.

⁷⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* [1953], 4th ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §593.

⁷⁵ In the case of Phillips’ discussion (*Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, 157–59), there is yet another level of distillation, since he is selecting his examples third-hand from von der Ruhr (or fourth-hand, if we take into account the fact that von der Ruhr’s source, namely McLuhan, has gleaned her examples from other publications).

⁷⁶ Von der Ruhr, “Is Animism Alive and Well?,” 31.

⁷⁷ See, among many other examples, several of the speeches of Native Americans collected in Bob Blaisdell, ed., *Great Speeches by Native Americans* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2000), such as the one in which Tecumseh of the Shawnee (dated October 1811) declares that “The red man owns the country” and “When the white man approaches you the earth shall swallow him up” (58).

⁷⁸ Vine Deloria, Jr., *We Talk, You Listen: New Tribes, New Turf* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2007 [1970]), 186, original emphasis.

In the next section, I develop further the point that nuance and complexity in the cultural ways of indigenous peoples needs to be recognized if our philosophical pictures of animistic forms of religiosity are not to degenerate into romanticized caricatures. To give focus to the discussion, I examine in particular debates surrounding the concept of the “ecologically noble savage.”

IV. Demythologizing the “Ecologically Noble Savage”

Though commonly associated with Jean-Jacques Rousseau,⁷⁹ the concept of the noble savage is traceable to a work on the Americas by the French lawyer and explorer Marc Lescarbot first published in 1609,⁸⁰ and the earliest occurrence of the term “noble savage” in English is in John Dryden’s Restoration drama *The Conquest of Granada* (1672).⁸¹ Discussion of the concept has been revived and intensified in recent decades because of the prevalence both in anthropological literature and in popular culture of the contention, or the uncritical assumption, that the ways of life pursued by indigenous peoples are generally more conducive to environmental sustainability than are those of modern industrial societies. In the wake of a provocative article by conservation biologist Kent Redford, this area of controversy became known as the “ecologically noble savage debate” owing to the perception by some that it hinges upon the viability of a certain version of the noble savage ideal, suitably reconfigured as an image of indigenous people ecologically attuned to their natural environment.⁸²

⁷⁹ Especially Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* [1755], trans. Franklin Philip (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁸⁰ See, e.g., Marc Lescarbot, *Nova Francia: A Description of Acadia, 1606*, trans. P. Erondelle (New York: Harper, 1928), 100: “the savages have that noble quality, that they give liberally, casting at the feet of him whom they will honour the present that they give him.” Lescarbot immediately adds, however, that this apparent generosity is always motivated by the hope of receiving something in return. For the original French, see Lescarbot, *Histoire de la Nouvelle France* (Paris: Milot, 1609), 598.

⁸¹ Dryden attributes to Almanzor, who fights for the Moors against the Spanish (but turns out to be the lost son of a Spanish duke), the words “I am as free as Nature first made man | ’Ere the base Laws of Servitude began | When wild in woods the noble Savage ran” (*The Conquest of Granada by the Spaniards* [London: Herringman, 1672], Pt. 1, Act 1). For discussion of the history of the notion of the noble savage, see Ter Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), who argues that the very idea that belief in this notion was widespread in Enlightenment Europe is a more recent myth or “construction.”

⁸² Redford, “The Ecologically Noble Savage”; Raymond Hames, “The Ecologically Noble Savage Debate,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 36 (2007), 177–90; Joy Porter, *Native American Environmentalism: Land, Spirit, and the Idea of Wilderness* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), xiv.

The debate has frequently been heated and politically charged, not least because of the close connections between claims that indigenous peoples are capable of managing natural habitats sustainably on the one hand and their demands for self-determination and land rights on the other. As one commentator has remarked, “any evidence of ecologically unsound activities by indigenous and traditional peoples undermines their basic rights to land, resources, and cultural practice.”⁸³ Promoters both of indigenous peoples’ rights and of biodiversity conservation, including many spokespersons for indigenous communities themselves, have thus been keen to identify indigenous peoples as spiritually sensitive custodians of the environment.⁸⁴ Others have been concerned that this conception of indigenous peoples is not only inaccurate and simplistic but is ultimately detrimental to indigenous peoples’ long-term interests, given that it is liable to foster the supposition that land rights ought to be contingent upon the demonstration of an overtly conservationist ethic.⁸⁵ What those on this latter side of the argument have contended is that in places where natural resources have been conserved by indigenous peoples, this is generally a mere epiphenomenon of factors such as “low population density, simple technology, and lack of external markets to spur over-exploitation.”⁸⁶ The conclusion, of course, need not be that there is no association between traditional indigenous ways of living and the conservation of biodiversity: it is just that the association rarely takes the form of a deliberate ethically motivated strategy on the part of the indigenous peoples. As Allyn Stearman observes of the Yuquí people of Bolivia, for instance, they possess nothing that could be described as “Resource management strategies ... because they do not perceive a need for them.”⁸⁷

The relevance of this debate to the issues I have been examining is that it highlights a need on the part of those who wish to discuss indigenous forms of religion or spirituality, including philosophers of religion, to develop an awareness of broader issues of political and cultural representation. While it remains worthwhile to look for distinctive ways of relating to and thinking about the world in the words and actions of indigenous peoples (including ways of

⁸³ Darrell A. Posey, “Do Amazonian Indians Conserve Their Environment? And Who Are We to Know If They Do or Do Not?,” *Abstracts: American Anthropological Association: 92nd Annual Meeting, Washington, DC, November 17–21, 1993*, 473, quoted in William T. Vickers, “From Opportunism to Nascent Conservation: The Case of the Siona-Secoya,” *Human Nature* 5, no. 4 (1994), 307–37, at 308.

⁸⁴ Cf. United Nations: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *State of the World’s Indigenous Peoples* (New York: United Nations, 2009), 60: “[S]pirituality defines the relationships of indigenous peoples with their environment as custodians of the land.”

⁸⁵ Allyn MacLean Stearman, “‘Only Slaves Climb Trees’: Revisiting the Myth of the Ecologically Noble Savage in Amazonia,” *Human Nature* 5, no. 4 (1994), 339–57, at 351.

⁸⁶ Hames, “The Ecologically Noble Savage Debate,” 179–80; cf. Eugene S. Hunn, “Mobility as a Factor Limiting Resource Use in the Columbia Plateau of North America,” in *Resource Managers: North American and Australian Hunter-Gatherers*, ed. Nancy M. Williams and Eugene S. Hunn (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1982), 17–43; Michael S. Alvard, “Testing the ‘Ecologically Noble Savage’ Hypothesis: Interspecific Prey Choice by Piro Hunters of Amazonian Peru,” *Human Ecology* 21, no. 4 (1993), 355–87, at 384.

⁸⁷ Stearman, “‘Only Slaves Climb Trees,’” 348.

relating and thinking that may usefully be identified as animistic), the appreciation that we have of the messy complexities of human life is prone to be hampered if our observations are too narrowly focused. In addition, then, to assembling examples of statements that evoke a sense of benign reverence for the natural world, a more thoroughgoing “grammatical” investigation of Native American ways of being should seek examples that disrupt facile or unquestioned assumptions.

Among the passages that von der Ruhr quotes, but which are amenable to divergent interpretations, is one in which Big Thunder describes the killing of a moose. Having referred to the Great Spirit as father and the earth as mother, Big Thunder proceeds to explain how, when hunting, it is not the Indian’s arrow that engenders the death of the moose: “it is nature that kills him.” This is because, with the arrow embedded in its side, the moose, “like all living things ... goes to our mother to be healed.” By repeatedly rubbing its wound against the earth, it forces the arrow deeper into its flesh, “till at last when he is nearly exhausted and I come up with him, the arrow may be driven clean through his body.”⁸⁸ Von der Ruhr quotes this passage to illustrate how the assertion that it is nature rather than the arrow that kills the moose avoids instantiating confusion over causal relations. We see in Big Thunder’s description what he means by the assertion and how it coheres with the general attitude of respect towards the earth (“our mother”) that he exhibits. For von der Ruhr’s purposes, there is no need to explore the different moral reactions that the passage could elicit. But a fuller discussion might note, for example, the possibility of perceiving a certain cruelty in the thought that an animal, having gone “to our mother to be healed,” then finds itself caught in a spiral of increasing pain and ultimate death: the more it tries to relieve its agony by rubbing itself against the earth, the harsher its suffering becomes. The recognition of this cruel irony could be viewed as consonant with a sense of awe at the workings of nature: an acknowledgment that suffering and death are as much a part of reality as are joy and life. But the fact that any overt recognition of this irony is absent from Big Thunder’s own account may arouse a certain uneasiness in some readers, a feeling that the notion of the earth’s healing power is being construed in a manner that removes it from anything one had previously understood healing to consist in. These possibilities of alternative responses to a piece of quoted text in turn disclose possible ambivalences and complications in an animistic approach to life.

To further resist the temptation to romanticize or otherwise essentialize indigenous peoples, additional consideration might be given to the variety of ways in which, in practice, those peoples interact with one another and with their environment, including the animals and plants it comprises. Staying with the American context, studies have been carried out not only of contemporary indigenous communities but also, by means of archaeological methods, of

⁸⁸ Curtis, *The Indians’ Book*, 11, also quoted in von der Ruhr, “Is Animism Alive and Well?,” 36, from McLuhan, *Touch the Earth*, 22.

early inhabitants over the long course of the pre-Columbian era. An especially long-running and turbulent debate concerns the question of whether, or to what extent, human hunting activities precipitated the prodigious extinction of large mammalian species towards the end of the Pleistocene Epoch around eleven thousand years ago. The mammals that vanished from North America within a period that some have estimated to be fewer than four centuries include various species of camel, elk-moose, giant beaver, ground sloth, horse, mammoth, mastodont, ox, peccary, and tapir;⁸⁹ extinctions in South America at approximately the same time were even more numerous.⁹⁰ Several contributors to the debate maintain that climatic factors were decisive in occasioning these extinctions,⁹¹ but major climatic changes had occurred at other times without causing such dramatic extinction rates.⁹² Moreover, the period of extinctions appears to have coincided precisely with the rapid colonization of the Americas by people who, soon after arriving from Siberia, developed weaponry that included the Clovis point, a sharpened stone spearhead especially effective for killing large prey animals.⁹³

While it would be anachronistic to identify indigenous Americans in the modern era with their paleolithic forebears, the evidence that early inhabitants of the Americas transformed

⁸⁹ Stuart Fiedel, “Sudden Deaths: The Chronology of Terminal Pleistocene Megafaunal Extinction,” in *American Megafaunal Extinctions at the End of the Pleistocene*, ed. Gary Haynes (n.p.: Springer, 2009), 21–37, at 21.

⁹⁰ Alberto L. Cione, Eduardo P. Tonni, and Leopoldo Soibelzon, “Did Humans Cause the Late Pleistocene-Early Holocene Mammalian Extinctions in South America in a Context of Shrinking Open Areas?” in *American Megafaunal Extinctions at the End of the Pleistocene*, 125–44.

⁹¹ Russell W. Graham, “The Pleistocene Terrestrial Mammal Fauna of North America,” in *Evolution of Tertiary Mammals of North America, Volume 1: Terrestrial Carnivores, Ungulates, and Ungulatelike Mammals*, ed. Christine M. Janis, Kathleen M. Scott, and Louis L. Jacobs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 66–71, at 69–70; Donald K. Grayson and David J. Meltzer, “Clovis Hunting and Large Mammal Extinction: A Critical Review of the Evidence,” *Journal of World Prehistory* 16, no. 4 (2002), 313–59; idem, “A Requiem for North American Overkill,” *Journal of Archaeological Science* 30, no. 5 (2003), 585–93. For more circumspect assessments of the evidence, see Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: Norton, 1999), chap. 1; Robert L. Kelly and Mary M. Prasciunas, “Did the Ancestors of Native Americans Cause Animal Extinctions in Late-Pleistocene North America? And Does It Matter If They Did?” in *Native Americans and the Environment: Perspectives on the Ecological Indian*, ed. Michael E. Harkin and David Rich Lewis (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 95–122.

⁹² Fiedel, “Sudden Deaths,” 30.

⁹³ Clovis points are so named because they were first discovered, in the late 1920s and 1930s, at a Paleoindian site several miles south of the city of Clovis in New Mexico (Anthony T. Boldurian and John L. Cotter, *Clovis Revisited: New Perspectives on Paleoindian Adaptations from Blackwater Draw, New Mexico* [Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Museum, 1999], 10–13). Subsequent excavations have unearthed Clovis points at sites across North America, from Canada down to northern Mexico (Michael J. O’Brien, Briggs Buchanan, Matthew T. Boulanger, Alex Mesoudi, Mark Collard, Metin I. Eeren, R. Alexander Bentley, and R. Lee Lyman, “Transmission of Cultural Variants in the North American Paleolithic,” in *Learning Strategies and Cultural Evolution during the Paleolithic*, ed. Alex Mesoudi and Kenichi Aoki [Tokyo: Springer, 2015], 121–43, at 126); similar points have been found in Central and South America (Gary Haynes, *The Early Settlement of North America: The Clovis Era* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], 11).

the ecological balance by contributing significantly to the extinction of many large mammal species calls into question the glib assumption that pre-Columbian human populations invariably lived in harmony with an “undisturbed wilderness.”⁹⁴

If we turn from studies of prehistoric peoples to more recent history, we see that the large-scale killing of prey species remained a common feature of indigenous life. The phenomenon of the buffalo jump, for example, appears to have persisted among Plains Indians for thousands of years up to the mid-nineteenth century, when the prevalence and efficiency of hunting on horseback with rifles made the practice largely redundant.⁹⁵ The buffalo jump involved luring or driving entire herds of bison over steep cliff edges so that they would fall to their deaths. Parts of the bison could then be procured to be either eaten, in the case of the meat, or worn or traded in the case of the hides. But the animals were slain in such vast numbers – often hundreds at a time – that many carcasses were left to rot either without being touched at all or with only delicacies such as tongues or humps being removed.⁹⁶

It has been noted by scholars that traditional religious beliefs were bound up with the reluctance among Native Americans to allow any member of a hunted herd to survive. Shepard Krech underscores two beliefs in particular. One of these is the conception of bison as what Hallowell termed “other-than-human persons”;⁹⁷ the other is the idea that bison originate from beneath the earth and that, during the season when they migrate away from normal hunting areas, they have temporarily returned either to deep caverns or to grasslands at the bottom of lakes.⁹⁸ The conceiving of bison as persons is relevant because it connects with the thought that any bison that escapes, either from a “jump” or from other methods of mass slaughter, “would warn others away” much as a human person might under comparable circumstances, thereby threatening the success of future hunts.⁹⁹ Meanwhile, conceiving of the bison as originating underground and regularly residing underwater makes possible the expectation that they are unlimited in number and hence are ineradicable, regardless of how

⁹⁴ John Bakeless, *The Eyes of Discovery: The Pageant of North America as Seen by the First Explorers* (New York: Dover, 1961 [1950]), 201.

⁹⁵ Ed Sponholz, “Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump: A Centre for Cultural Preservation and Understanding,” in *Buffalo*, ed. John E. Foster, Dick Harrison, and I. S. MacLaren (Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta Press, 1992), 45–59, at 47.

⁹⁶ Eleanor Verbicky-Todd, *Communal Buffalo Hunting among the Plains Indians: An Ethnographic and Historic Review* (Alberta: Archaeological Survey of Alberta, 1984), 169.

⁹⁷ For Hallowell’s use of this phrase, see his “Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View” and *The Ojibwa of Berens River, Manitoba: Ethnography into History*, ed. Jennifer S. H. Brown (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College, 1992), esp. 64.

⁹⁸ Krech, *The Ecological Indian*, 147–48; Peter Coates, “The Human and Natural Environment,” in *A New Introduction to American Studies*, ed. Howard Temperley and Christopher Bigsby (Harlow: Pearson, 2006), 7–28, at 15.

⁹⁹ Krech, *The Ecological Indian*, 147.

many are dispatched.¹⁰⁰ Also pertinent to Indian hunting practices is the widespread belief in the reincarnation or regeneration of animals after their physical demise. The Asinîskâwiðiniwak, or Rock Cree, of Northern Manitoba, for example, held that species such as moose, caribou, and beaver are “infinitely renewable resources whose numbers could neither be reduced by overkilling nor managed by selective hunting.”¹⁰¹ As in many forager societies, including other Native American or First Nations peoples, the Rock Cree had no conception of waste because they considered that animal bodies are regenerated after death; hence “animals could not be destroyed but only temporarily displaced.”¹⁰²

Deeply embedded in Rock Cree culture is the conviction that to kill an animal is a sacred act for which the animal will be grateful. The quarry is spoken of as a “benefactor who ‘loves’ the hunter and voluntarily surrenders its body,” in return for which the hunter performs ritual displays of honor and respect.¹⁰³ Moreover, since it is deemed positively offensive to refrain from killing any animal that has offered itself, the practice of mass slaughter, too, was regarded as obligatory; failure to fulfill the obligation would, in effect, constitute an expression of ingratitude.¹⁰⁴ The concept of respect is thus a complex one that can take many forms. If assumptions were to be made that the respectful treatment of an animal precludes killing it or at least places an onus on the hunter to scrupulously utilize all parts of the carcass, or that it ensures the sparing of young or pregnant animals and prohibits the indiscriminate slaughter of large groups at one time, exceptions to each of these assumptions could be found across multiple Native American communities.

Further exploration of Native American conceptions of respect in relation to animals or “other-than-human persons” or to the environment more generally would require consideration of various injunctions. These include injunctions to treat parts of a dead animal’s body (such as bones, intestines, blood) in a prescribed manner; to wear the correct ritual charms and clothing when performing rites associated with the hunt; to avoid mocking animals; to display in trees the antlers, scapulae, or skulls of land animals and the skulls and wings of birds, and to ensure that the bones of aquatic animals such as beavers are returned to

¹⁰⁰ E. Douglas Branch, *The Hunting of the Buffalo* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997 [1929]), esp. 2–3.

¹⁰¹ Robert Brightman, *Grateful Prey: Rock Cree Human–Animal Relationships* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 280.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 288.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 287.

¹⁰⁴ Krech, *The Ecological Indian*, 205; *idem*, “Beyond *The Ecological Indian*,” in *Native Americans and the Environment: Perspectives on the Ecological Indian*, ed. Michael E. Harkin and David Rich Lewis (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 3–31, at 12. The operative notion of an animal’s “offering” itself or making itself available is flexible in this context. It appears to encompass any instance in which an animal is amenable to be killed, regardless of whether it has or has not been deliberately hunted.

the water.¹⁰⁵ “Animals treated well in this manner will come to hunters who have demonstrated their friendship.”¹⁰⁶ Further exploration of the topic would also require consideration of how indigenous understandings of respect have changed in response to the encounter with people of European heritage. It was undoubtedly the introduction of European trading markets that encouraged a dramatic escalation in the killing of furbearing animals such as beaver.¹⁰⁷ But it has also been the case that European understandings of conservation and sustainability have played a part in changing Native American conceptions of their environment.

My aim in this section has not been to execute an exhaustive investigation of the concept of respect among Native Americans, but merely to offer some reminders of the need to refrain from assuming too hastily that we already know what such a concept comes to in these societies. Von der Ruhr and Phillips perform an important philosophical task when they emphasize the possibility of interpreting animistic forms of language in ways that are neither crudely literalistic nor reductively metaphorical or merely figurative. Yet the examples chosen by these philosophers and their respective discussions of those examples run a serious risk of playing into prevalent stereotypes of the “ecological Indian” or the “ecologically noble savage.” Such stereotypes, as others have argued, “are ultimately dehumanizing” on account of their obscuring “both variation within human groups and commonalities between them.”¹⁰⁸ The debates surrounding these stereotypes are multifaceted and often fraught. But closing one’s mind to those debates is not an option if, in the philosophy of religion, one wishes to elucidate the diverse forms of language and forms of life of indigenous peoples without sacrificing attention to ambivalence and complexity.

V. Concluding Remarks

Nothing in the foregoing section is intended to downplay the devastating consequences of European and Euro-American colonial activity for Native American populations and their environments. It should go without saying that, as Krech has put it, “whatever the impact of Indians on the land and resources, it didn’t hold a candle to the long-term impact of people of

¹⁰⁵ On the prescribed treatment of animals among the Mistassini Cree in particular, see Adrian Tanner, *Bringing Home Animals: Religious Ideology and Mode of Production of the Mistassini Cree Hunters* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1979), chaps. 6–8; idem, “The Significance of Hunting Territories Today,” in *Native People, Native Lands: Canadian Indians, Inuit and Metis*, ed. Bruce Alden Cox, rev. ed. (Ottawa, ON: Carleton University Press, 1988), 60–74, at 68–9.

¹⁰⁶ Krech, *The Ecological Indian*, 204.

¹⁰⁷ Graeme Wynn, “On the Margins of Empire (1760–1840),” in *The Illustrated History of Canada: 25th Anniversary Edition*, ed. Craig Brown (Montreal, QC, and Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2012), 181–276, at 228–33.

¹⁰⁸ Krech, *The Ecological Indian*, 26.

European descent.”¹⁰⁹ Regardless of whether indigenous communities, either in the Americas or elsewhere, can be shown to operate with a distinctively conservationist ethic, it remains the case that the conservation of biodiversity is likely to be best served by allowing such communities to retain control over their traditional territories.¹¹⁰ But my purpose has not been to reach a decisive conclusion on that issue. Rather, it has been to expose some of the difficulties involved in giving any account of indigenous peoples and of the religious dimensions of their lives and forms of belief and language. These difficulties arise for anyone who wishes to engage philosophically with indigenous religions and thence to bring them, as it were, within the purview of philosophy of religion, as opposed to ignoring or marginalizing them as has routinely been done in much philosophy of religion hitherto. But philosophizing is never an easy matter.¹¹¹

The work of some of the philosophers I have discussed in this article has opened up fruitful paths to pursue. Eldridge and Clack have, in different ways, contended that obstacles to appreciating the intelligibility of animistic ways of thinking may be diminished by, at least as a starting point, contemplating these ways as contributing to “a natural poetry of being” (Eldridge) or “poetry of life” (Clack). Certainly, such an approach can help to loosen the grip of stodgy literalistic and instrumentalist interpretive assumptions that we might otherwise be inclined to impose on the phenomena of animism – assumptions that get in the way of hearing animistic vocabulary as offering what Phillips calls “a language in which to think of the world.” What both von der Ruhr and Phillips remind us is that poetry need not be thought of here in a reductive nonrealist sense, as though a poem were merely a frothy way of saying what could just as readily and far more clearly be stated in non-poetic terms. If we were to reduce poetry to metaphor, and to subscribe to the dubious conception of metaphor as invariably amenable to literal paraphrase, then we might wish to dissociate animism from poetry on the grounds that, as Tylor legitimately insists, animistic discourse is generally “thoughtful, consistent, and quite really and seriously meant.”¹¹² But once a richer understanding of poetic possibilities is introduced, the perceived need for this dissociation subsides.

Whatever we think of deploying the notion of the poetic in this context, the theme of contextualization remains vital, for it is by that means that we are enabled to hear – or to begin to hear – the significance of the language being used. Placing examples side by side, as

¹⁰⁹ Krech, “Beyond *The Ecological Indian*,” 10.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Kent H. Redford and Allyn M. Stearman, “Forest Dwelling Native Amazonians and the Conservation of Biodiversity: Interests in Common or in Collision?,” *Conservation Biology* 7, no. 2 (1993), 248–55, at 254; Stearman, “‘Only Slaves Climb Trees’,” 353.

¹¹¹ Cf. Rush Rhees, *Without Answers* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 171–72: “[I]f you want to pursue philosophy as something in which you can take it easy, then you should leave it alone. (Or in other words, if you try to do anything that way, you will not be doing philosophy.)”

¹¹² Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, vol. 1, 285.

von der Ruhr does, assists this process, building up a picture of what it means to speak of the earth as mother, the Great Spirit as father, of trees and rocks as feeling sore and distressed and so on. Von der Ruhr thus gives us a lesson in what Phillips has dubbed the “hermeneutics of contemplation” – the method of discerning possibilities of sense within modes of discourse and behavior by contemplating their “surroundings with sufficient philosophical attention.”¹¹³ The lesson is one that applies to philosophy of religion more broadly, as the pervasive debates between purportedly “realist” and “nonrealist” theories of religious language all too readily try to bypass the need for attentiveness to language in use, preferring instead to ask questions about what some particular “proposition” (such as “God exists”) means in isolation from any concrete situation in which it is expressed. The results of such abstractive methods of analysis are epitomized by the passage I cited from Angelika Krebs in which words of protest delivered by a Native American spiritual leader, having been dislocated from their cultural surroundings, are construed as a theoretical “claim” that fails to satisfy the criteria for the application of a certain concept. These criteria, it is supposed, are available independently of close scrutiny of anything in the specific cultural or religious lives of the Indians who talk in these ways.

What I have urged in the latter portion of the article is the need to be wary of allowing an over-romanticized image – prevalent in both popular and academic culture – to dictate our selection and interpretation of examples. To do so in the study of indigenous religions is to impoverish our appreciation of the heterogeneousness of the category of indigeneity and of the multiple forms of life that have become associated with it. In the case of animistic worldviews, it is especially important to recognize the nuances pertaining to the concept of respect, for a culturally naïve understanding of this concept is apt to miss, for example, the extent to which the large-scale slaughter of animals can be, and has been, deemed not merely to be compatible with respect but to feature among its proper expressions. It is by attending to nuances such as these that moves can be made towards a deprovincialization of philosophy of religion that keeps its eye on the need, as Phillips so often put it, to do “conceptual justice to the world in all its variety.”

¹¹³ Phillips, *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, 86.