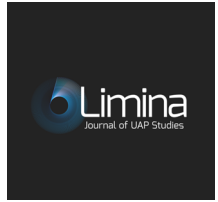




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Understanding UAPs: Surveying the Nature Spirits Hypothesis

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ABSTRACT

The literature on UFOs / UAPs has seen much discussion concerning the central ontological question: on the rational assumption that we are dealing with something objectively real (i.e., not just the product of delusion or misperception or other prosaic explanations), *what* are we dealing with? A basic taxonomy of options can readily be constructed, with the initial division consisting of a split between naturalist theories (i.e., theories compatible with metaphysical naturalism) and non-naturalist theories (i.e., theories incompatible with metaphysical naturalism). Naturalist theories held sway within early ufology, especially the extraterrestrial hypothesis. However, dissenting non-naturalist voices gradually gained ground from the late 1960s onward, and today a variety of such theories receives sustained discussion. These utilize ideas derived from major world religions, from the history of philosophy, and even from recent developments in analytic metaphysics and philosophy of religion. My principal aim in this short paper is to provide an accessible overview and preliminary assessment of one important non-naturalist theory of UAP ontology: animism.

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1. Introduction

The ufology literature (both popular and scholarly) is split between a broadly skeptical or debunking side, and a broadly open or accepting side. The former considers the entire UFO phenomenon to be explicable in conventional naturalistic terms, wholly accountable by reference to some combination of prosaic factors like misperception, delusion, and deception.

The latter is open to unconventional explanations of the phenomenon, whether naturalistic or non-naturalistic, and it is this side of the literature which will be under consideration here.

A claim or theory is naturalistic if it is compatible with metaphysical naturalism. Though the precise formulation of ‘metaphysical naturalism’ (and cognates like ‘physicalism’ and ‘materialism’) has been the subject of debate within analytic

philosophy,¹ for present purposes we can get by with the following rough characterization: metaphysical naturalism is the claim that the only kind of reality is *physical* reality. In other words, the realm of the genuinely real is occupied entirely by things like space, time, and matter, such that there are no souls or gods or psychic powers or other sorts of irreducibly incorporeal objects or properties or events.

Some who accept the reality and unconventionality of UFOs / UAPs maintain that they fit within a naturalistic explanatory paradigm. By far the most common of these is the extraterrestrial hypothesis (ETH); indeed within popular culture and among the general public it is still the case that UFOs and space aliens are practically synonymous. Within the ufology literature the ETH was overwhelmingly dominant from the early 1950s through the late 1960s (even the debunking side of the literature took the ETH as its central opponent), after which it remained the prevailing viewpoint, though one receiving competition from alternative perspectives. Some of these alternatives are likewise naturalistic, and remain under discussion today. For example, there is the theory that UAPs are vehicles from parallel universes or other physical dimensions (rather than other planets within our universe);² there is the theory that UAPs are vehicles from the future, piloted by human beings thousands or millions of years advanced beyond us;³ there is the idea that they are products of terrestrial but hidden (perhaps underground or underwater) societies, piloted either by humans who broke away from the rest of the species or by non-human entities that have long shared the planet with us;⁴ more radically, there is the theory that we are all living in a computer simulation, with our experience of UAPs and other paranormal events arising from features of the programming.⁵ These by no means exhaust the range of naturalistic alternatives proposed in opposition to the ETH

(or occasionally in tandem with it, e.g., the eclectic notion that some UFOs are extraterrestrial while others are products of a breakaway human civilization), but should suffice for purposes of illustration.⁶

Non-naturalist accounts of the phenomenon grew in influence from the late 1960s onward. (By ‘non-naturalist accounts’ I intend any theory that is incompatible with metaphysical naturalism.) This was partly thanks to the work of authors like Keel (1970), Rogo (1977), Steiger (1973), and Vallée (1969), among others, who cast some doubt on the ETH and drew links between aspects of the phenomenon and other areas of inquiry, such as research into religious experience, folklore, parapsychology, and western esotericism. Clark (2000, p. 139) writes:

By the end of the 1960s, the consensus that had guided ufologists through the early years of the UFO controversy had broken down. Though to outsiders ufology was still assumed to be synonymous with belief in visitors from outer space, within ufology three schools of thought had begun to compete for dominance: the materialists (ETH partisans), the occultists (followers of Keel and Jacques Vallée), and the culture commentators (psychosocial theorists), who professed to find existential themes expressed in UFO reports, which were presumed to be subjective experiences.

Another reason for the growth of non-naturalist theories lay in the wider cultural changes taking place in the west, notably the rise of the New Age movement (which encouraged broadly spiritual interpretations of the phenomenon) and the traditionalist religious counter-reaction against it (which encouraged Christian critics of the New Age

1 See for instance Dumsday (2016), Goetz & Taliaferro (2008), Poland (1994), Rea (2002), Ritchie (2008), Stoljar (2010), and Strawson (2020). Note that not all treat ‘naturalism’ and ‘physicalism’ and ‘materialism’ as equivalent, though for simplicity’s sake I will do so here.

2 The US military whistleblower David Grusch, who came to prominence in summer 2023 with his allegations of a major government coverup of UAP data and technology, has been among the many recent figures expressing sympathy for this theory. Gipson *et al.* (2023), writing for *NewsNation*, report on his comments: “Grusch says the craft may not be traveling through space as we understand it. ‘It is a well-established fact, at least mathematically and based on empirical observation and analysis, that there most likely are physical, additional spatial dimensions,’ he said. ‘And you can imagine, four and five-dimensional space where what we experience is linear time, ends up being a physical dimension in higher dimensional space where you were living there. You could translate across what we perceive as a linear flow. So there is a possibility that this is a theory here. I’m not saying this is 100% the case but it could be that this is not necessarily extraterrestrial, and it’s actually coming from a higher dimensional physical space that might be co-located right here.’”

3 See especially Masters (2019; 2022).

4 See for instance Tonnie (2010) and Shaw & Shaw (2022).

5 This is hardly a favourite amongst serious ufologists, but it increasingly shows up in popular discussions. Consider for instance Stieb (2019), writing for the website *Vulture*: “Paranormal events are not hauntings or alien encounters, but glitches in the simulation. This theory is the one most explored on Reddit forums like r/Are We Living in a Simulation and r/Glitch in the Matrix, where users explore big ideas in philosophy funnelled into the details of the odd or the occult.”

6 To be clear, acceptance of a naturalistic explanation for UAPs does not entail acceptance of metaphysical naturalism. One can easily be a practicing Muslim (for instance) while also believing that UAPs are extraterrestrial vehicles piloted by space aliens. As defined here, a theory is naturalistic if it is *compatible with* metaphysical naturalism; it doesn’t have to *imply* metaphysical naturalism in order to count as naturalistic.

to interpret UFOs in religious terms, whether angelic,⁷ or, more often, demonic⁸.

Non-naturalist theories have continued to proliferate in the intervening decades, such that there is quite a range available for consideration by today's ufologists. When I first began this project, my intention was to present an accessible, up-to-date, concise-yet-reasonably-comprehensive overview of non-naturalist ontologies of the UFO phenomenon.

However, I soon realized that a work of such scope (useful though it would be) is more suitable to a monograph than a brief article. The number of such theories on offer is simply too large, and the literature to be surveyed too vast, to permit any but the most superficial of article-length overviews.

Consequently I have scaled back my ambitions considerably; the goal now is simply to survey and assess one among the more interesting of the non-naturalist ontologies broached in the recent literature: animism. On this view, the UFO phenomenon is attributable at least in part (if not entirely) to the activities of nature spirits.

The 'more interesting' criterion is of course largely subjective, and in this case reflects my disciplinary bias, insofar as the theory I opt to focus on here is one which intersects with recent developments in analytic philosophy of religion. I am disinclined to apologize for this bias, insofar as some selection criterion must be applied, and this one at least boasts the advantage of supplying a toehold for academics traditionally uninvolved in ufology (namely, philosophers) to enter the dialogue.

The remainder is divided as follows: in **section two** I clarify the nature of animism and survey the ways in which it has been brought to bear on the UFO question; I also provide a rough first-pass at evaluating those efforts. This assessment focuses less on the independent philosophical plausibility of

animism (which has its pros and cons and is much-debated), and more on its utility for ufology—i.e., whether and to what degree its truth might help to explain the phenomenon. I cap things off with a short concluding **third section**.

2. An Overview and Assessment of A Non-Naturalist UAP Ontology: Animism

There has been a growing scholarly interest in animism in recent years, an expansion that began in religious studies and anthropology,⁹ and has now extended to Biblical studies,¹⁰ theology,¹¹ and philosophy.¹² This increased interest is warranted, both due to the inherent philosophical interest of the view, and as a reflection of animism's global numerical strength; animists number in the millions at least, found mostly among indigenous groups and followers of new religious movements (e.g., Neo-Pagans widely affirm it).¹³

Dumsday (2024, p. 96), after reviewing the various competing definitions of animism present in the recent literature, puts forward the following as a workable sufficient condition for a view's counting as a type of animism: "A doctrine counts as a form of animism if it proposes that there exist living or even personal nature spirits that inhabit or partly constitute or are in some other way closely related to at least some *prima facie* impersonal objects, features, or processes of our environment (e.g., rocks, rivers, thunderstorms, etc.)." This understanding does appear to capture a core claim commonly shared by self-identified animists, while remaining noncommittal with respect to a host of intra-animist controversies (for instance the debate over how exactly a nature spirit is linked to its associated location or environmental trait,¹⁴ or the disagreement over whether it is possible for a man-made object to have an associated

7 As a notable example, the evangelist Billy Graham (1986) briefly entertained the UFOs-as-angelic hypothesis.

8 Representative volumes from this period include Rose (1975), Weldon & Levitt (1975), and Wilson (1974). Note that while the latter two books are rarely cited today, Rose's remains influential in some Eastern Orthodox circles.

9 For an overview of this segment of the renewal, see Laack (2020). Examples would include Harvey (2017), Rambelli (2019), and Wilkinson (2017; 2023).

10 See especially Joerstad (2019; 2020).

11 See Beck (2015) and Wallace (2019).

12 See Bretz (2020), Burley (2020, ch. 7), Dumsday (2024, ch. 3), Fales (2023), Hall (2019), Hendricks (2022), Oppy (2023), Smith (2020; 2022; 2023a; 2023b), and Van Eyghen (2023a; 2023b). Note that philosophical interest in animism could be considered substantially higher depending on how one views its relationship with panpsychism (where panpsychism is, roughly, the claim that all fundamental material entities are to some degree conscious or at least proto-conscious). Panpsychism has enjoyed a major resurgence within analytic metaphysics and philosophy of mind. Depending on one's precise definitions, animism and panpsychism might be seen as tightly linked, perhaps even mutually entailing. But some (for instance Skrbina (2020, pp. 103-104)) are loath to admit a connection and try to show that the two views ought to be considered separately. Not wanting to wade into that dispute, for present purposes I will focus solely on animism.

13 On Neo-Pagan animism see for instance diZerega (2020) and Kaldera (2012).

14 Fales (2023, p. 180) helpfully draws out some divisions on that point: "Animists appear to subscribe to a range of ontologies concerning the nature of the spirits, demons, and the like that inhabit their world. And they accept a number of conceptions of how those spirits are associated with or localized to designated animals, plants, or natural features of the environment. Sometimes these beings are conceived as distinct individuals that inhabit their natural hosts. Such beings may be able to detach themselves from their hosts on occasion to engage in various missions. Or they may be non-separable from the body of their host, though nevertheless distinguishable from their host. Or, on the other hand, it may be supposed that the natural item—geological feature, plant, or animal—just is a person, with a mind that has human or quasi-human powers. There may be reasons for the particular conception of this relation to be in play in particular cases."

spirit,¹⁵ etc.).

There are a number of interesting philosophical and experiential arguments to be made on behalf of animism (and of course counter-arguments lurking around every corner, as with any worthwhile ontology). These can be consulted in the above-cited sources, and in the interests of time they will not be canvassed here. The key questions for present purposes are: **(i) how has animism been deployed in explaining some or all of the UFO phenomenon?** And, **(ii) does that deployment actually do the explanatory work assigned it?**

Turning to **question (i)**, the answer depends in part on how broadly one takes the sense of ‘nature spirit’ to extend. Does it, for example, encompass fairies, such that discussions of links between ufology and fairy lore would *ipso facto* constitute a ufological appeal to animism? If so, then Vallée’s (1969) landmark *Passport to Magonia*, with its central thesis of an equivalence between the two,¹⁶ could certainly be counted as an early presentation of the idea. And even if one were to quibble here, perhaps on grounds that fairies—at least as understood in the paradigmatic early modern fairy lore of the UK and Ireland—are not strictly the spirits of natural objects or features of the environment,¹⁷ Vallée could still be seen as open to an animist interpretation of the UFO phenomenon; while he does spend more of his time in *Passport* delving specifically into fairy lore, he also cites a number of patristic, mediaeval, and Renaissance-era sources that discuss nature spirits—rather than fairies—quite explicitly (see Vallée (1969, pp. 20-27)), and he maintains that these reports likewise display clear commonalities with aspects of the UFO phenomenon. He also points out (*ibid.*, pp. 74-75) that the ontologies of some mediaeval esotericists included varieties of nature spirit that seem to correspond to a sort of fairy, blurring what might initially seem like solid dividing lines,

and he notes that in later Victorian-era fairy lore, fairies were sometimes described as associated with natural features (e.g., as inhabiting rocks or dwelling in the air).

Over the course of succeeding decades Vallée has come to favour a broader, interdimensional or ultraterrestrial ontology of UAPs (the precise contours of which I will not attempt to outline here) rather than a strictly animist one (though never outright disclaiming a possible role for nature spirits, so far as I am aware); nevertheless *Passport to Magonia* is significant in the present context as the first extended ufological treatment of the animist theory.

After the work of Vallée, other researchers would build upon the hypothesized connection between ufology, fairies, and related entities posited in traditional belief systems. Denzler (2001, p. 110) notes that in the 1970s several “suggested that they [UFO entities] might be more akin to ‘elementals’—the spirits inhabiting trees, water, rocks, flowers, and so on.” Folklorists like Rojcewicz (1991) built further on these conceptual linkages, as did paranormal theorists like Harpur (1994, p. 60), who wrote: “I am not convinced that the cultivation and subsequent ‘disenchantment’ of the landscape has done away with the daimons whose natural habitat it was.¹⁸ They may well be returning in new and unexpected forms, like the mystery big cats which lurk in the suburbs or the bizarre circular patterns impressed on the cornfields.”

This angle on the phenomenon is also sympathetically discussed by Harvard psychiatrist and abductee researcher John Mack in his first book on the topic (1994, ch. 1). In his later work Mack became even more enamoured by shamanistic and other indigenous forms of religious belief, and invested in their possible connections to the phenomenon. Thus the opening chapter of Mack’s (1999, pp. 7-9) later book spotlights several living indigenous belief

15 Kaldera (2012, p. 12) writes that animism is the “belief that not only all living things, but all natural things, *and some man-made things*, have an indwelling spirit/soul of their own” [emphasis added]. He adds (*ibid.*, p. 52): “In an animistic worldview, everything in nature is alive—not just plants and animals, but bodies of water, stones, mountains, the dirt itself. Many man-made objects are also alive. In ancient times, every lasting man-made object was a product of many hours of concentrated work, and became alive through attention, focus, and directed energy of its making. Today, objects made in a similar way can also develop souls and life-energy, although they may or may not need human attention to keep the soul in them.” It is worth observing that the universalist side of Kaldera’s animism (i.e., the claim that *everything* in nature counts as living) is not a feature of all forms of the theory. Van Eyghen (2023a, p. 2) points out that “animists do not always believe that *all* objects or *all* animals have spirits....Some (or even most) objects, plants and animals are regarded as devoid of spirits, as most westerners believe” [emphases in original].

16 Vallée (1969, p. 67) writes: “[L]et me simply state again my basic contention: the modern, global belief in flying saucers and their occupants is identical to an earlier belief in the fairy-faith. The entities described as the pilots of the craft are indistinguishable from the elves, sylphs, and *lutins* of the Middle Ages. Through the observations of unidentified flying objects, we are concerned with an agency our ancestors knew well and regarded with terror....”

17 Young (2023, p. 191) writes: “Although traditional fairies lived out in the wilds, they were not described as nature spirits in our sources. There was no sense that these fairies were the spirits of trees or flowers. If they were spirits of anything they were the spirits of places, and if the fairies ‘represented’ something it was a life-giving but implacable countryside.” Though I of course defer to Young’s expertise on fairy lore, I am not sure that his conceptual division is a convincing one—would not most animist systems count a regional spirit (say, the spirit of a given valley or desert) as a nature spirit? And yet at some point the boundaries between a nature spirit and other sorts of entities (gods for example) are liable to blur. For example, a spirit possessing providential control over all the oceans of the earth starts to sound more like Poseidon or some other pagan deity than a typical nature spirit. Neo-pagan thinkers have devoted some attention to this question of the ontological boundary lines between gods and nature spirits, though without coming to any very definite conclusions; see for instance Greer (2005, pp. 96-98), Kaldera (2012, pp. 16 and 52), and Beckett (2019, p. 23).

18 Note that by ‘daimons’ there he does not refer to Christian demonology, but to a more general notion of preternatural entities (which are here being envisioned along the lines of nature spirits).

systems, including the Lakota affirmation of nature spirits, and suggests that these all shed light on UFOs and their apparent occupants. He later expands on this theme, drawing explicit linkages between UFOs and the animal spirits (*ibid.*, p. 148) and forest spirits (*ibid.*, p. 172) of various global indigenous traditions.

That said, it is worth recalling that Mack never settled on any particular ontology of the phenomenon, and in the same book he sympathetically discusses other hypotheses, including the theory of parallel universes (*ibid.*, p. 62), a sort of emanationism (*ibid.*, pp. 65-70), and a kind of panentheism (*ibid.*, pp. 235-236). Ultimately he seems most comfortable with an eclectic or pluralist hypothesis, though one that is clearly compatible with animism and influenced by it (*ibid.*, pp. 288-289):

Whatever words we may use to describe this realm or realms, it appears ever more likely that we exist in a multidimensional cosmos or multiverse, within which space and time appear to be constructs of the mind that order or simplify the chaos of energy and vibration in which we are immersed.... The cosmos that is revealed by this opening of consciousness, far from being an empty place of dead matter and energy, appears to be filled with beings, creatures, spirits, intelligences, gods—the names vary according to the apparent worldview of the observer or function and behaviour of the entity at hand—that have through the millennia been intimately involved with human existence.... The idea that we live in a multidimensional universe populated by beings or life-forms that are less densely embodied than we are, or perhaps not embodied at all, is not new to Eastern religious traditions or to most of the indigenous peoples of the world.

More recently, the Sufi thinker Charles Upton argues that the UFO phenomenon is best situated conceptually within a broadly Neoplatonic system in which an elaborate hierarchy of being incorporates various layers of spiritual and semi-corporeal preternatural entities. Those entities include both nature spirits and jinn (beings posited in Islamic theology as intermediate between angels and humans). Some such beings are evil, and it is these that produce UFOs and their associated phenomena, often at the instigation of ceremonial magicians. Upton also suggests a connection between nature spirits and the ‘gods’ worshipped by contemporary Neo-

Pagans (2021, pp. 40-41):

Furthermore, the elemental spirits who form the connection between the natural world and its Creator are not evil, though they may be dangerous; the subtle, conscious archetype of a beautiful oak tree, for example, cannot be called a demon.... But the Jinn who are staging the present UFO manifestations almost certainly are demons.... It may even be true, though I can't prove it, that those in the Neo-Pagan world who are attracted to the worship of elementals and nature spirits instead of the Divine Spirit may actually be seducing and corrupting these spirits, even if, to begin with, they are basically benign, or neutral. If you were being worshipped by thousands of devotees because they were fascinated by you and believed that their contact with you could give them magical powers, wouldn't you be seriously tempted? Wouldn't you be influenced to forget that your only duty is to remember God and obey His will?

Hunter (2023, pp. 34-35) also briefly entertains the notion that animism may play a role in explaining UAPs (and anomalous phenomena more broadly), though seemingly only as part of a broader, eclectic ontological schema:

Diversity might also be a deep feature of consciousness itself—just as biological systems tend towards increased biodiversity, so too might consciousness tend towards psychodiversity—and this may have important implications for our understanding of the varieties of high strangeness experiences.... Not only does this suggest that there is a broad range of different states of consciousness involved in high strangeness experiences (altered states, trances, and so on), but it also implies that there are a great many different forms of mind and consciousness out there in the world, with which we might interact during such experiences. In a *world of many minds* we might expect to encounter ways of being that are ‘alien’ to our own particular sensibilities.... We might even expect to encounter non-human parts of our own minds. As such, perspectives like panpsychism (the notion that consciousness is a fundamental aspect of reality)... and animism (which suggests that the world is made up of persons, not all of which are human, and with

whom we must establish good relationships)...might provide useful frameworks for contemplating some high strangeness experiences [emphasis in original].

He goes on to tie this framework together with a multiverse ontology, so the resulting picture is complex, and it's not clear how much (if any) explanatory work Hunter really thinks can be *uniquely* assigned to objectively real nature spirits.

Although Thigpen's (2022) work is mostly focused on the possible reality of extraterrestrial intelligent life, and more specifically with the attempt to demonstrate that the existence of such life would be compatible with Roman Catholicism, in the book's appendix he does consider the UFO phenomenon and briefly suggests that it might be explained (at least in part) by reference to intelligent nature spirits immanent in our environment. One expects that the suggestion may have seemed a bit jarring to some of his Catholic readers, but to be fair it would seem less eyebrow-raising to those who have kept abreast of the renewed interest in animism by Christian scholars noted above.

Finally, Dumsday (2024) takes up the idea that animism's potential utility for explaining part of the UFO phenomenon might help address a philosophical objection levelled against it by Hendricks (2022). Hendricks argues that if nature spirits were real, we would expect that people today (including people in modern western societies) would commonly report encounters with them. And yet, he claims, such reports are quite rare, and he takes this to constitute strong evidence against the existence of nature spirits. After summarizing several pro-animist replies to this objection put forward by Smith (2022), Dumsday (2024, pp. 114-115) adds the following:

The back and forth between Smith and Hendricks regarding how to explain the alleged silence of nature spirits in modern industrialized society is interesting, and seems to me a draw. No doubt further reasons might be suggested as to why nature spirits refrain from communication, and/or why modern people fail to be attuned to such communication. To toss in just such a suggestion for animists to ponder: at the risk of increasing the strangeness quotient of the present discussion out of all acceptable proportions (no doubt some readers already have difficulty entertaining the reality of nature spirits), another pro-animist possibility

would be that such spirits are actually appearing to or communicating with modern people with some frequency, only under other guises. Perhaps they are manifesting themselves to us in ways that make more sense to us and/or better accord with our modern technological context and background beliefs. With that possibility in mind, it might be worth mentioning that a frequently recurrent theme amongst UFO contactees and abductees over the past several decades has been the danger of environmental destruction. I.e., people who claim to be contacted by space aliens or even taken aboard craft often claim that the big-eyed spindly grey beings (or attractive blonde Nordics or whoever) warn them of the dire risks of pollution or climate change or nuclear weapons etc., and ask the contactees/abductees to spread the word to their fellow humans. If intelligent and somewhat powerful sky spirits or spirits of certain geographical locales (for instance) exist and want to try and discourage our environmental destruction, manifesting in forms that fit with today's more common background beliefs might rationally be seen as a more hopeful strategy than appearing in forms that would have been more familiar to distant ancestors or contemporary indigenous cultures. (Which would the typical modern person find more compelling and/or less insane: the warning of an apparently technologically superior UFO occupant, or the warning of a self-identified tree spirit?) This would at least be one way of interpreting the UFO contactee/abductee phenomenon without having to buy into physically impossible visitation by literal extraterrestrials. (General relativity simply does not allow faster than light travel, so if ETs are out there beyond our solar system, they have no way of getting here within a feasible timescale. Whatever UFOs may be, they aren't piloted by aliens.) Conceivably then, an enterprising animist might make a careful analysis of the UFO literature and mine it for potentially relevant material in support of her view (though I expect such an argument would meet with quite a limited favourable reception).

The suggestion then is that since the ETH is unworkable, and the existence of nature spirits might account for at least one common feature of the modern UFO phenomenon (the occupants' frequently expressed interest in environmentalism),

then animism might be put to productive explanatory work in that context.

Doubtless I have missed other valuable sources that discuss possible linkages between UAPs and nature spirits (and I hope readers will draw my attention to materials I've overlooked), but the preceding should still suffice for providing an answer to question (i), even if an incomplete answer. And the passage from Dumsday (2024) makes for an apt segue into a discussion of **question (ii)**: whether animism is actually helpful in explaining any aspect of the phenomenon.

Assuming for the sake of argument that animism is itself rationally defensible (an issue which I cannot engage with here), my own inclination is to think that it is not going to be of much use for ufology. I put this forward as a tentative and preliminary assessment, and welcome pushback from advocates of the animist position, but my reasons are as follows.

The chief defect of animism in this context is its vagueness. Absent committing to a *specific form* of animism (e.g., Shinto animism, or the animism of some particular Neo-Pagan sect, or of some particular indigenous people group) we will know little about what kinds of nature spirits exist,¹⁹ how powerful or intelligent they are, what sorts of characters they possess, whether or to what degree they can cooperate amongst themselves—and over what distances—etc. This lack of specificity is a problem; absent more specific hypotheses, how is one to use animism to make clear theoretical predictions that can then be verified or disconfirmed by reference to (suitably vetted) UAP data?

To start from that last point regarding distances, UAPs are generally thought to be a global reality.²⁰ Let's say that at least one aspect of the phenomenon (intelligently directed glowing orbs, for example) is the manifestation of a nature spirit, perhaps the spirit of lightning. Is there one spirit of lightning for the entire planet, or multiple such spirits spread over many regions? If the latter, can they communicate with each other and cooperate? If so, what distances are involved? Can a lightning spirit in Mexico coordinate UAP activity with a lightning spirit in Australia? What reason is there to accept any one answer to these questions over another (again, in the absence of a specific confessional commitment)?

One could answer that it makes the most sense to posit

that there are a great many nature spirits of varying types and of varying degrees of intelligence and power, and that some at least are highly intelligent and very powerful, and that these are capable of coordinating UAP manifestations by many different nature spirits around the globe. Why? Precisely because such a version of animism (in contrast to other versions) would be maximally helpful in explaining the UFO phenomenon. But from a ufologist's point of view that will likely come across as *ad hoc* and unconvincing.

Additionally, though Dumsday has drawn attention to one component of the UFO phenomenon that *prima facie* accords well with animism (on the contentious assumptions that nature spirits are quite powerful and intelligent and motivated to try and halt environmental destruction), there are other components that seem to make little sense on an animist hypothesis. E.g., why all the failed prophecies? What's with the obsessive interest in sexually assaulting abductees? Why the huge variety of craft-types and occupant-types, when it would be less work and more convincing to be consistent with the imagery? And could nature spirits even succeed in producing the range of physical effects associated with UAPs?²¹ These are not intended as rhetorical questions, but as genuine inquiries put to those sympathetic to the nature spirits hypothesis. And I am happy to grant that there may be reasonable and principled animist answers to all of them; however, I cannot discern any easy route to their provision.

Moreover, when the larger context is taken into account, it is not clear that animism would supply a particularly effective explanation for the seeming environmental interests of (some) ufonauts. For why do the large majority of UFO events (whether CE1 - CE4) involve no communication pertaining to environmentalism? Wouldn't such communication be a far more common feature of these experiences, if this were really the underlying motivation of the beings bringing them about? And, contrary to Dumsday's supposition, it is not the case that modern westerners are inevitably more likely to find extraterrestrial imagery and messaging plausible, in contrast to imagery and messaging that is openly and unambiguously sourced by nature spirits. If the nature spirits made unambiguous experiences of themselves as common as are UFO experiences, such that

19 This issue has already been alluded to in the summary of Vallée above, and the question of where (or if?) to draw lines between fairies, nature spirits, elementals, gods etc. The prospects for taxonomical precision here seem dim.

20 I have occasionally seen this contradicted in the non-naturalist side of the UFO literature. Longtime ufologist Joe Jordan, for instance, argues that the phenomenon is virtually non-existent in South Korea, where he has lived since 2011. A proponent of the UFOs-as-demonic hypothesis, he suggests that this is explicable by reference to a much lower level of participation in occult and New Age activities by South Koreans, as compared with Americans. See Jordan & Dezember (2020, ch. 8).

21 Animism might seem especially ill-suited to account for the most dramatic of these, namely crash retrievals and non-human bodily remains (if in fact they exist). Though in fairness, these would pose a challenge for most (all?) non-naturalist ontologies of UAPs.

over the course of a decade tens of thousands of people from all over the world could report *consistent* messages from (say) tree spirits warning us against fossil fuels or nuclear weapons, that would surely be more compelling messaging than whatever ends up being conveyed by way of this bizarre array of divergent (indeed sometimes contradictory) UAP encounters and messages.

In short, while it is not unreasonable for ufologists to explore animism and its potential utility (and unsurprising that a variety of them has actually done so over the years), I am sceptical whether the effort can actually yield much in the way of explanatory benefit.

That is not to say the attempt is not worthwhile—I have provided nothing like a knockdown objection against making it, and the sorts of questions I have raised could reasonably be seen by committed animists less as objections against their position and more as launching pads for a new research program in which the implications of their theory are more fully fleshed out and clarified. I have no wish to discourage such work; however, I stand by my contention that, among the presently available non-naturalist hypotheses of the UFO phenomenon, animism likely does not rank among the most promising options.

3. Conclusion

This paper has had limited aims: to summarize a sample non-naturalist ontology recently discussed in the ufological literature as having potential explanatory utility for the discipline, and to subject that ontology to some scrutiny regarding that utility. I chose to focus on animism because that theory has recently received greater attention in my own field of analytic philosophy and has also long played a limited role in ufological theorizing. Many other ontologies could have been canvassed, and indeed many more ought to be, especially by those ufologists pursuing research agendas focused on non-naturalist views of the phenomenon. I hope the paper encourages further philosophical work in this domain.

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