

**THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN IDEALISM,
ANIMISM, AND PAGANISM**

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INTRODUCTION

This article presents a compelling intersection of philosophy, spirituality, and cultural tradition, seeking to explore these concepts through an ontological lens, arguing for idealism as a framework through which animistic and pagan worldviews gain coherence. By synthesizing definitions from philosophical discourse, historical analysis, and contemporary practices, the discussion aims to illuminate how these systems collectively challenge materialist paradigms and reframe humanity's relationship with existence.

While the author's background in biology diverges from formal training in philosophy or theology, this interdisciplinary approach underscores the universality of qualitative experience and invites the reader to reconsider the limitations that are present in popular thoughts, engaging instead with alternative epistemologies that prioritize relationality and presence.

DEFINITIONS

2.1 IDEALISM

The word "idealism" is basically an umbrella term because, depending on the context, it could mean something completely different. For example, this medical article published in 2006 uses the definition of idealism as "the cherishing or pursuit of high or noble principles, purposes, or goals" [22]. Although there's no such a thing as a "wrong definition", it's certain that said definition is not the same one used by Hegel and other self-declared idealists, for example [2].

As stated by Guyer and Horstmann in their entry on "The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy", there are two modern conceptions of idealism in philosophy: the one that says that something mental is the foundation of reality (also called ontological idealism) and the one that says that everything we can and will ever know is dependent on the mind (also called epistemological idealism) [13]. In our case, we will be sticking with an ontological definition, as we are going to dive deeper into the being, not the acquirement of knowledge.

Back to talking about Hegel, it's in our interest to mention his work called "Science of Logic" (in this case, "Volume One: The Objective Logic, Book One: The Doctrine of being"), as he divides the being into three parts of his dialectical logic: determinate being (quality), magnitude (quantity), and measure (synthesis of both). Inspired by that division, I believe it would be wise, when talking about idealism, to utilize the ideas of quality and quantity as a basis for the definition.

Therefore, by merging together both the ontological idealism definition given previously and also the inspiration from Hegel, we reach to the definition that will be used on this article:

"Idealism is the idea that quality is the ultimate foundation of all reality."

Although this definition might be seen as confusing by some, it will be explained and defended better in the next chapter.

2.2 ANIMISM

Animism does not suffer the same problems as idealism, for it's not really an umbrella term, but it does suffer with another type of problem: it's a fuzzy term. The word was first coined by Sir Edward Burnett Tylor in his work "Primitive Culture", published in 1871, calling it initially as the "doctrine of souls and other spiritual beings" [24].

In spite of the fact that he initially calls animism just that, he does give, on page 294, an interesting remark, as he says:

"To the theory of animism belong those endless tales which all nations tell of the presiding genii of nature, the spirits of the cliffs, wells, waterfalls, volcanoes, the elves and wood nymphs seen at times by human eyes when wandering by moonlight or assembled at their fairy festivals."

That observation of Tylor is intriguing, given that other authors also do characterize animism as having those traits. Graham Harvey, in his 2005 book "Animism: respecting the living world", explores the divergences and evolutions of the term through time [15]. Below is a table that shows three of the most significant, in my opinion, ideas from other thinkers that were brought up by Harvey:

Person	Idea
David Hume	Attributing signs of human likeness, beautiful in poetry and absurd in philosophy.
James Frazer	Savages see and treat the world as animate, like themselves, as if the world had souls.
Irving Hallowell	Recognition of person-hood in a range of human and other-than-human persons.

With that brief overview on the opinions related to the definition of animism, the one that will be used on this article is the following:

"Animism is the idea that everything possesses subjective experiences."

2.3 PAGANISM

The origin of the word "pagan" can be traced back to the time that the Romans officially converted to Christianity. It was extensively used by the western roman empire as a way of mocking the countryside folk that continued practising their ancestral religion [5]. Even though it's considered a pejorative term by origin, it will continue to be used on this article, but not with ill intentions, rather because it's way more simpler to get it all bundled together in a word than to write the same sentence over and over again.

According to Owen Davies's research written on his little introduction to paganism called "Paganism: A Very Short Introduction", the Christians that left Europe for trade and conquest did indeed call followers of non-Abrahamic religions as "pagans" [10]. Seeing that the creators of the term "paganism" consider it as meaning any non-Abrahamic religious tradition, therefore:

"Paganism refers to any non-Abrahamic religious tradition."

While that definition does cover many other religions, in this article, we will focus more on western pagan religions.

ON IDEALISM

3.1 QUALITY VERSUS QUANTITY

As it was defined in the last chapter, idealism puts quality as the ultimate foundation of reality. As a result of that, and also seeing how quality and quantity were shown as inter-playing phenomena by Hegel, we can ask ourselves a certain question:

- What even is quality and quantity?

Quality, in this context, might differ a little from the usual and casual definition. In day to day conversation, quality might be used as an indicative of how "good" or "bad" something is in said context. However, the definition that will be used here is more related to the term commonly used in philosophy called "qualia".

As the first to introduce the term in it's modern sense, Clarence Irving Lewis defined the word "qualia" as the immediate phenomenal qualities of experience, that is, the redness of red, the fluffiness of a cat, the loudness of a firearm [16]. With the word quality, that's what's meant here, granted that the casual way also can be applied as a quality of "goodness" and "badness", as in feeling the good and feeling the bad of said thing.

Now that the idea of quality is grasped, it's easy to define quantity. In a nutshell, just as quality is related to qualia, quantity is related to another term named "quanta". Unlike qualia, quanta doesn't trace that well to any specific first "creator" of the modern definition, however it was used by lots of physicists, including famous figures like Max Planck, for example [20]. Quanta, as the name might or might not suggest to you, is related to quantities, just like in the phrase "I have two oranges", where "orange" is the unit that is being quantified and "two" is the quantity.

Last but not least, there are some final questions that might have been asked, they are the following ones:

- If quality is the foundation of reality to idealists, what would someone that follows quantity as the foundation be called?
- What about the idea that both quality and quantity coexist as foundations?

- Why not a third thing?

In summary, while idealists view quality as the foundation of reality, materialists consider quantity to be its basis. When both perspectives coexist, this framework is known as dualism. Alternatively, the notion of a third, neutral foundation, one that relies on neither quality nor quantity, is called neutral monism. These concepts will be explored in greater detail in the following sections of this chapter.

3.2 PROBLEMS OF MATERIALISM

When we talk about materialism as placing quantities at the foundation of reality, one might ask:

- Quantities of what?

Materialism typically reduces everything to measurable, physical quantities, such as mass, energy, particles, and forces, and constructs units of measurement based on them, such as kilograms, joules, and meters. But what, fundamentally, is a kilogram? Or what is a joule? While organizations like the International Bureau of Weights and Measures (BIPM) provide definitions for these units, there is something deeply problematic about this framework: it doesn't really state what is the quantity for.

According to the General Conference on Weights and Measures, the supreme authority of BIPM, the unit of measurement "second" is defined as the following:

"The second, symbol s, is the SI unit of time. It is defined by taking the fixed numerical value of the caesium frequency $\Delta\nu_{Cs}$, the unperturbed ground-state hyperfine transition frequency of the caesium-133 atom, to be 9.192.631.770 when expressed in the unit Hz, which is equal to s^{-1} ."
- BIPM [4]

Notice anything unusual? They use quantities to define the unit of quantity. Let's give another example:

"The metre, symbol m, is the SI unit of length. It is defined by taking the fixed numerical value of the speed of light in vacuum c to be 299.792.458 when expressed in the unit $m s^{-1}$, where the second is defined in terms of the caesium frequency $\Delta\nu_{Cs}$."
- BIPM [3]

The seven standard units defined by the BIPM (second, metre, kilogram, ampere, kelvin, mole, candela) all follow the same pattern: they utilize the definition of other standard units and/or they use quantities to define said unit, not really specifying what it's really quantifying.

It is indeed possible to write an entire book about that specific critique and it's also not so hard to give a good response against it, but a more important, and harder to counter, critique is related to qualities directly:

- How can, in a world of only quantities, a quality exist?

This question is what brings into light the infamous hard problem of consciousness.

The hard problem of consciousness, as first formulated by David Chalmers in his article called "Facing up to the problem of consciousness", is explained as, in his own words, "the problem of experience":

"It is undeniable that some organisms are subjects of experience. But the question of how it is that these systems are subjects of experience is perplexing. Why is it that when our cognitive systems engage in visual and auditory information-processing, we have visual or auditory experience: the quality of deep blue, the sensation of middle C? How can we explain why there is something it is like to entertain a mental image, or to experience an emotion? It is widely agreed that experience arises from a physical basis, but we have no good explanation of why and how it so arises. Why should physical processing give rise to a rich inner life at all? It seems objectively unreasonable that it should, and yet it does."

- David Chalmers, "Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness" [7]

The materialist, trying to defend his position when coming into contact with said contradiction, usually chooses one of these positions:

eliminativism, reductionism, representationalism, or illusionism.

Eliminativists, like Paul Churchland, would say that qualities (or qualia) do not really exist [9]. Reductionists, like Daniel Dennett, would prefer saying that it can all be reduced down to how your brain functions [11].

Representationalists, like Michael Tye, defend the idea that qualities are just representational states of the brain, nothing more and nothing else [23].

Lastly, illusionists think the qualities are just illusions, like how Keith Frankish thinks [12].

In contrast to their self proclaimed differences in thought, they all can be summarized as just in denial, considering that neither of them really bridge the gap that is left between their quantitative world and the qualities we perceive. One example given by the reductionist Daniel Dennett is that qualities are just the "desktop interface of a computer", foolishly forgetting that the desktop interface just is a desktop interface because we experience them with our own eyes, therefore being an useless example. At last, it's important to reiterate that there's no knowledge without experiences, and the mistakes of materialism just reinforce that.

3.3 DUALISM AND NEUTRAL MONISM

Just as explained in the first section of this chapter, there are two other views that need to be explored: dualism and neutral monism. Recapitulating, dualism is the view that both quality and quantity are the ultimate foundations of reality and neutral monism is the view that there's another third thing that is the ultimate foundation.

Starting with the critique of the latter, one of the main problems I personally see with neutral monism is the lack of alternatives:

- If it's not quality nor quantity, what else is there to be?

Although it sounds like a silly critique, it does make sense and it is just as valid, considering the neutral monists are the ones that need to make it lack vagueness. Some neutral monists, like Ernst Mach, are just closeted idealists, considering that they see the "neutral one" as being qualitative or, in the case of Mach, "sensations" [17].

Referring to dualism, the most lazy, in my opinion, critique of it is the one done by Bertrand Russell in his book "The Analysis of Mind", which is basically just the application of Occam's razor and it's just weak, considering the razor doesn't apply everywhere [21]. A rhetorical question that I find interesting to ask yourself when talking about dualism is the following one:

- If everything had the quality of yellowness and only that, would quantity even exist?

Another alternative would be to localize it instead of making it apply globally to the entire reality:

- If there's somewhere in reality that only the quality of yellowness exist, where's the quantity there?

Considering that dualists see quantity as being foundational to reality just as quality is, there should be quantity present in those cases. Another remark that arises by using those rhetorical questions is in relation to the uniqueness of a quality, as if it's not possible to isolate a quality, then it's not really a unique quality.

ON ANIMISM

4.1 WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A BAT?

"What is it like to be a bat?" is the name of an article written by the American philosopher Thomas Nagel and published in 1974. The core argument of the book is that we cannot perceive how it's like to be a bat, as in, we cannot feel like a bat, nor any other perspective that is not our own. As Nagel explains:

"In so far as I can imagine this (which is not very far), it tells me only what it would be like for me to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a bat to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task."

- Thomas Nagel, "What is it like to be a bat?" [19]

Nagel's argument centres on the irreducible nature of subjectivity as the notion that consciousness is not merely a sequence of physical processes, but a first-person and lived experience unique to each being. By emphasizing the impossibility of "feeling" another entity's subjective reality, he highlights a fundamental epistemic boundary: we cannot directly inhabit the experiential world of a bat (or any other being) because their consciousness is shaped by perceptual, cognitive, and sensory frameworks alien to our own. While Nagel does not explicitly address animism, his framework nonetheless resonates with animistic perspectives, as both grapple with the inaccessibility of "other" subjectivenesses. This tension sets the stage for exploring how both compare when given an idealistic framework.

4.2 SUBJECTIVENESS IN AN IDEALISTIC REALITY

Considering the reality as ultimately qualitative, we could stretch Nagel's perspective on subjectivity. It is argued, like how we previously discussed, that our perception is not the same one as the bat's perception, nor my perception is the same as your perception, but a question that could be brought up:

- What about the rock?

When I say rock, I do not mean Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, I mean literally a rock, a naturally occurring aggregate of minerals. According to Nagel, consciousness occurs...

"[...] at many levels of animal life, though we cannot be sure of its presence in the simpler organisms, and it is very difficult to say in general what provides evidence of it. [...] No doubt it occurs in countless forms totally unimaginable to us, on other planets in other solar systems throughout the universe. But no matter how the form may vary, the fact that an organism has conscious experience at all means, basically, that there is something it is like to be that organism."

- Thomas Nagel, "What is it like to be a bat?" [19]

If the experience is something that brings the idea of being like said organism, then in an universe that has experience and qualities as foundation of reality would in turn also have that characteristic applied to it as a whole, as well as parts of it. In a nutshell, the rock has the same qualitative ground that we do, therefore we can ask ourselves a new question:

- What is it like to be a rock?

4.3 TAKING CARE OF OTHERS

The rock, in our perspective, is an inanimate object, and we are not wrong in saying that, but we do assume that because it lacks, for example, pain receptors, that it does not feel pain. The problem with that assumption is that pain itself, as a quality, is an experience, and the way we usually assess if an entity is feeling pain is by looking at their movements, sounds, and overall reactions. The rock, however, does not produce such things, therefore we truly cannot even guess what it feels. Even though that's the case, it brings an interesting moral dilemma:

- Should we even care what inanimate beings feel?

In my point of view, we should treat them with respect, for we don't know how it will be like for us when other animate beings treat us badly after we become inanimate, as in, after we die.

ON PAGANISM

5.1 PAGANISM IN THE PAST

Paganism, referring to any non-Abrahamic religious tradition, as we discussed in the definitions chapter, is and was very diverse in Europe, covering all parts of it that have been inhabited by humans, as well as having various different conceptual approaches, such as the dichotomy between centralized religion (such as the Romans had, with their priesthood and specific rituals) and decentralized (such as the case with the Nordics, that relied more on oral tradition and tribal rites). As it was cited in "The Handbook of Religions in Ancient Europe":

"The picture of religion in ancient Europe that emerges even from such a thumbnail sketch is one of diversity and complexity. The time depth is vast, the evidence – whether archaeological or written – is difficult to interpret, and the variety of religions documented by the sources is bewildering. For students, scholars and members of the broader public wishing to expand their horizons in this field, it is challenging in the extreme to attempt to gain an overall picture of religious history before the advent of Christianity."

- The Handbook of Religions in Ancient Europe [8]

A second example, albeit controversial, is that the diversity in thought also led to the emergence of monotheistic pagan religions in Europe. Stephen Mitchell, on his book "One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire", discusses some possibilities of monotheistic thoughts in Greece and Rome, Antisthenes being one of the examples of, according to his opinion, "monotheistic pagans of Europe":

"Philodemus says that Antisthenes in his work Physicus claims that by convention (κατά νόμον) there are many gods, but that by nature (κατά φύσιν) there is just one. Cicero presents the Epicurean Velleius as saying that according to Antisthenes the popular gods are many, but that by nature, in the nature of things, there is just one god. Velleius claims that Antisthenes in taking this position does away with the power and the reality of the gods."

- Stephen Mitchell [18]

Nonetheless, as time passed and more people converted, willingly or by force, to the christian faith, more and more of that traditional diversity was lost, until virtually everyone was partially or fully integrated into said Abrahamic religion.

5.2 MODERN WESTERN PAGANISM

In the modern era, with the secularization of the world and the disillusionment with the christian churches and their ideas, there has been a resurgence of non-Abrahamic, pagan traditions, in Europe and their past colonies. There are three main types of self-declared pagans nowadays in the western world: reconstructionists, neo-pagans, and atheist pagans.

The reconstructionists, as the name implies, are the ones that try reviving the ancient religious traditions by reconstructing them with the information available (as it's the case with, for example, the European Congress of Ethnic Religions (ECER) and the organizations that are part of it). As it's mentioned by them in their "about" page:

"The purpose of the ECER is to serve as an international body that will assist Ethnic Religious groups in various countries and will oppose discrimination against such groups. By Ethnic Religion, we mean religion, spirituality, and cosmology that is firmly grounded in a particular people's traditions. In our view, this does not include modern occult or ariosophic theories/ideologies, nor syncretic neo-religions."

- European Congress of Ethnic Religions [1]

Neo-pagans, different from the reconstructionists, do not attempt to follow the ancient ways as how they were followed, instead they create their own thing by mashing together elements from other religions and worldviews until it becomes something totally different from the original elements by themselves (as it's the case with, for example, the Wiccans). According to Ethan Doyle White, in his book "Wicca: History, Belief and Community in Modern Pagan Witchcraft", he states:

"Historical research has established that it [Wicca] is a twentieth-century new religious movement that, to a significant extent, consists of a patchwork built up from various older sources. [...] This should come as no surprise; after all, despite the fact that devout believers often insist against all odds that their faith came direct from a divine source free from human influences, in reality all the major religious ideologies can be identified as having antecedents. Wicca is no exception, and exists because it was able to draw upon a wide array of pre-existing religious, spiritual, and esoteric movements."

- Ethan Doyle White [25]

As per the definitions used in this article, however, Wicca and the majority of other neo-pagan religions cannot be considered a pagan religion, since they have direct or indirect influence of Abrahamic religions. Just as an example stated by White in the case of Wicca:

"Esoteric ideas could also be found on the fringes of established religion, and it has been suggested that Wicca was influenced in some small part by British heterodox Christian groups, in particular forms of Anglo-Catholicism, which embraced esoteric ideas, ritualism, and sacral nudity."

- Ethan Doyle White [25]

Last but not least, "atheist paganism" is an umbrella term for any type of self-declared pagan that does not believe in the existence of the divine, rather saying that the gods are man-made and represent archetypes of human psyche. Even though their existence is contradictory, as atheist pagans do not follow the traditions as religion, some people do identify as "atheist pagans", as it was shown in the book "Godless Paganism: Voices of Non-Theistic Pagans", in the "Yes, Virginia, I'm a Pagan Atheist" section, by Jeffrey Flagg:

"I'm an atheist. I'm also Pagan. It's actually not that hard to reconcile."

- Jeffrey Flagg [14]

Given all of that, we won't be considering neither neo-paganism nor atheist paganism as pagan religions, as each of them break away, in their own way, from the definition given in the second chapter. Before finishing this chapter, it's crucial to mention that Satanism, albeit rarely Satanists call themselves pagan, is not a type of paganism, for it's not only influenced directly by Christianity, but their entire existence relies on an Abrahamic infrastructure.

5.3 REINCARNATION AND LIFE AFTER DEATH

Despite the fact that animistic elements can be identified within polytheistic religions to various degrees (as some pagan religions are more akin to animistic ideas than others), these distinctions often hinge on individual or cultural conceptions of nature, in contrast to the doctrinal uniformity of Abrahamic traditions. Yet, perhaps the most profound existential inquiry, both culturally universal and deeply personal, lies in humanity's enduring fascination with the afterlife.

With thousands of possible interpretations of what happens after death, we will, in this last section, do a simplification by dividing into two categories of belief: reincarnation and permanent afterlife. In the case of reincarnation, one of the traditions that are described as following said idea is the Celtic one, as was described by Julius Caesar on his work "Commentarii de bello Gallico, Liber VI":

"Druides a bello abesse consueverunt neque tributa una cum reliquis pendunt; militiae vacationem omniumque rerum habent immunitatem. Tantis excitati praemiis et sua sponte multi in disciplinam conveniunt et a parentibus propinquisque mittuntur. Magnum ibi numerum versuum ediscere dicuntur. Itaque annos nonnulli videnos in disciplina permanent. Neque fas esse existimant ea litteris mandare, cum in reliquis fere rebus, publicis privatisque rationibus Graecis litteris utantur. Id mihi duabus de causis instituisse videntur, quod neque in vulgum disciplinam efferri velint neque eos, qui discunt, litteris confisos minus memoriae studere: quod fere plerisque accidit, ut praesidio litterarum diligentiam in perdiscendo ac memoriam remittant. In primis hoc volunt persuadere, non interire animas, sed ab aliis post mortem transire ad alios, atque hoc maxime ad virtutem excitari putant metu mortis neglecto. Multa praeterea de sideribus atque eorum motu, de mundi ac terrarum magnitudine, de rerum natura, de deorum immortalium vi ac potestate disputant et iuventuti tradunt."

- Julius Caesar [6]

As it can be noticed in the way Julius Caesar writes, the idea of reincarnation was not really a widespread view among the followers of the Roman religion, rather they believed in a permanent, static afterlife. The dead were believed to reside in the underworld (Orcus) as shades (manes),

and their spirits were honored through rituals to ensure their peaceful rest and protection of the living. However, a minority, by influence of Greek philosophy, did indeed adapt some ideas of reincarnation, but it stayed as a niche belief of the elites. Either way, both views can be accepted under an animistic and idealistic background, apparently with the only difference being that one view (the reincarnation one) is more restrictive, as in they do kind of limit new consciousness being created by introducing the idea of reincarnation, while the other view (the permanent afterlife one) is not as much.

In relation to ancestral worship, it does find coherence within idealistic and animistic frameworks, as their consciousness (the ancestral one) persists as an intrinsic aspect of existence and all entities participate in a continuum of sentience. Therefore, this continuity suggests that the dead remain present, not as just memories of the living, but as active and conscious participants.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The interplay between idealism, animism, and paganism reveals a profound tapestry of human attempts to reconcile existence with meaning. Idealism, positing quality as the foundation of reality, challenges the reductionist frameworks of materialism by centring consciousness and subjective experience, both phenomena that cannot really exist in a quantitative world. When fused with animism, the recognition of sentience in all entities, this worldview dissolves the artificial divide between the “living” and “non-living,” inviting us to perceive a universe teeming with interconnected subjectiveness. Pagan traditions, both ancient and modern, embody this synthesis, weaving rituals and beliefs that honour the continuity of consciousness, whether through ancestral veneration or cyclical rebirth. Together, these systems offer a counter-narrative to the mechanistic worldview, emphasizing relationality over quantification and presence over detachment.

The Celtic and Roman afterlife beliefs, as explored through Caesar’s lens, exemplify how cultures navigate mortality through distinct metaphysical paradigms. While the Druids’ embrace of reincarnation framed death as a transition within an eternal cycle, Roman ancestor worship sought permanence in memory and ritual. Both approaches, however, share an animistic undercurrent: the dead remain active participants in the living world, their consciousness persisting in a continuum of existence. This animistic thread, when viewed through idealism’s qualitative lens, suggests that death is not an erasure but a transformation. Such perspectives challenge modern materialism’s silence on the problems of consciousness, urging us to consider reality as fundamentally experiential rather than merely physical.

Ultimately, these reflections invite humility in the face of existence’s mysteries, as the journey through these ideas is not a conclusion but an invitation to dwell in the questions, to honour the unknown, and to recognize that in seeking answers, we mirror our ancestors’ timeless dance with the ineffable.

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