

# HPS208 – How we think about life

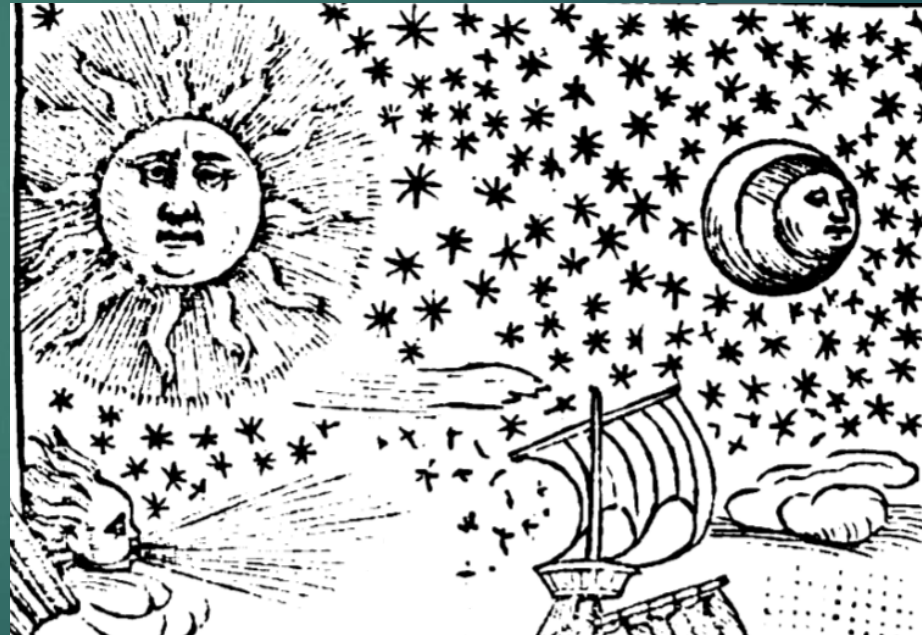
# The Living and the Non-Living

- ▶ Is a virus alive?
- ▶ What about a candle flame?



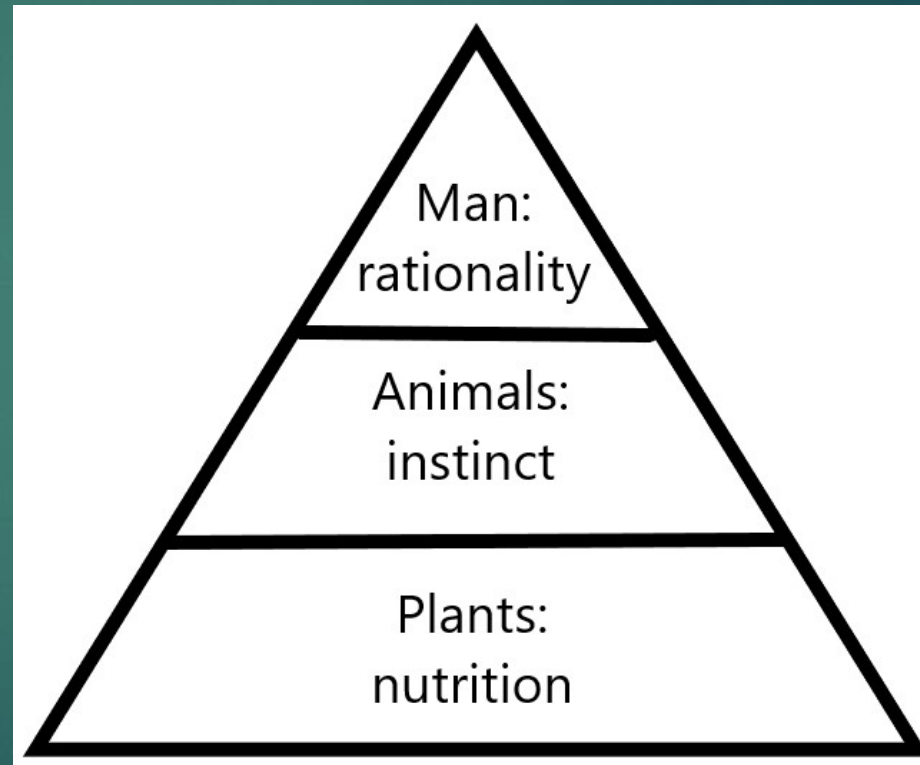
# Hylozoism

- ▶ Thales: “All things are full of gods. The magnet is alive; for it has the power of moving iron”
- ▶ The term ‘hylozoism’ is an early-modern one, applied retroactively to ancient Greek philosophers like Thales and Anaximander
- ▶ It refers to their idea that all matter is imbued with life
- ▶ Distinguish that from panpsychism, which says all matter has *mind*

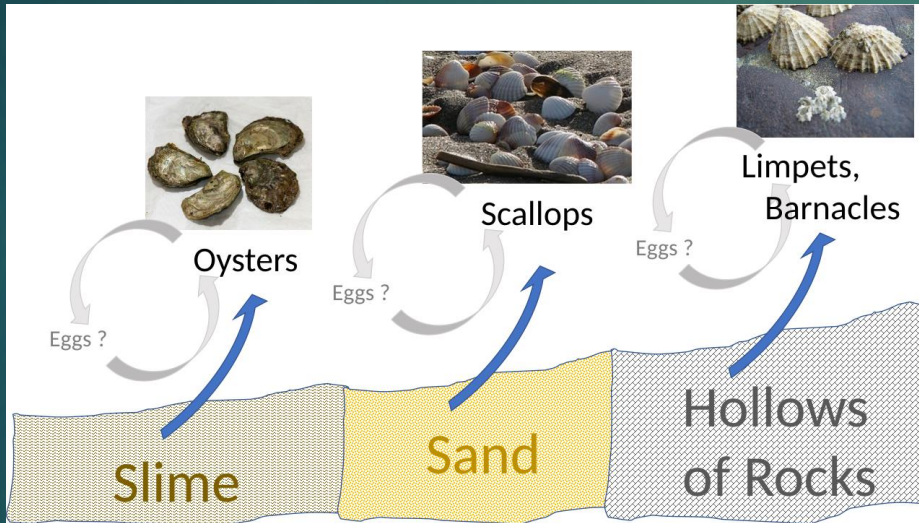


# Aristotle

- ▶ Aristotle claimed the essence of being alive is the ability to “resist internal and external perturbations”  
(<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/life/#Defi>)
- ▶ He attributed this capacity to the “nutritive soul”, common to all living things
- ▶ But the barrier between the living and non-living was permeable for him, as he (and many following biologists) believed in the ‘spontaneous generation’ of life



# Spontaneous Generation in Aristotle and Beyond



- ▶ The European tradition held that living things come from non-living matter until about the 19<sup>th</sup> century
- ▶ E.g., frogs spontaneously generate from mud, snakes from a decomposing human spine
- ▶ Pliny the Elder explained (Natural History XVI.93) that a particular wind, the *genitalis spiritus mundi*, could impregnate sheep, tigers, vultures, etc.



# Modern Definitions of Life

- ▶ It's unclear how many attempts have been made to define life, but the number is at least in the hundreds, and very likely in the thousands
- ▶ There is no consensus whatsoever about which, if any, are correct
- ▶ They focus on a wide range of properties, from structural features, to metabolic, to reproduction, genetic, complexity, etc. etc.,



# Modern Definitions of Life?

- ▶ Some authors have argued that the whole project is a big mistake from the beginning
- ▶ Machery (2012) makes the case that we're wasting our time even trying
- ▶ He argues that definitions are either 'folk' definitions, or scientific
- ▶ If they're 'folk' definitions, then no agreement is possible, because people just disagree
- ▶ If they're scientific, then they're useless, because different disciplines need different definitions

Synthese (2012) 185:145–164  
DOI 10.1007/s11229-011-9880-1

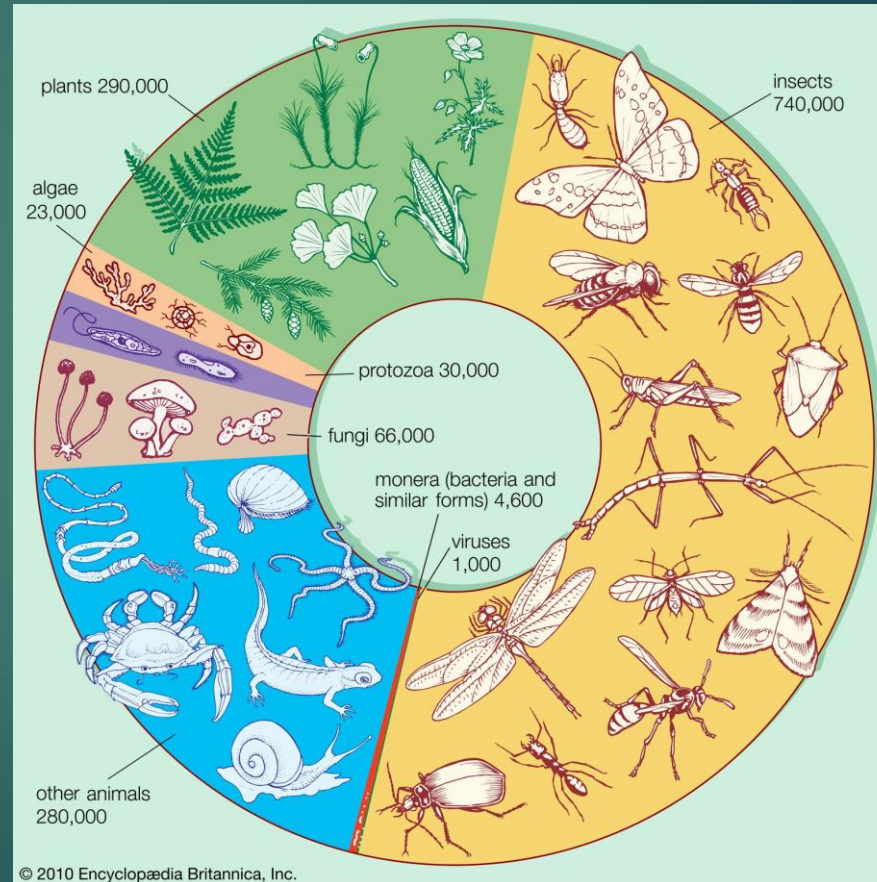
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## **Why I stopped worrying about the definition of life... and why you should as well**

**Edouard Machery**

# The Extent of Life

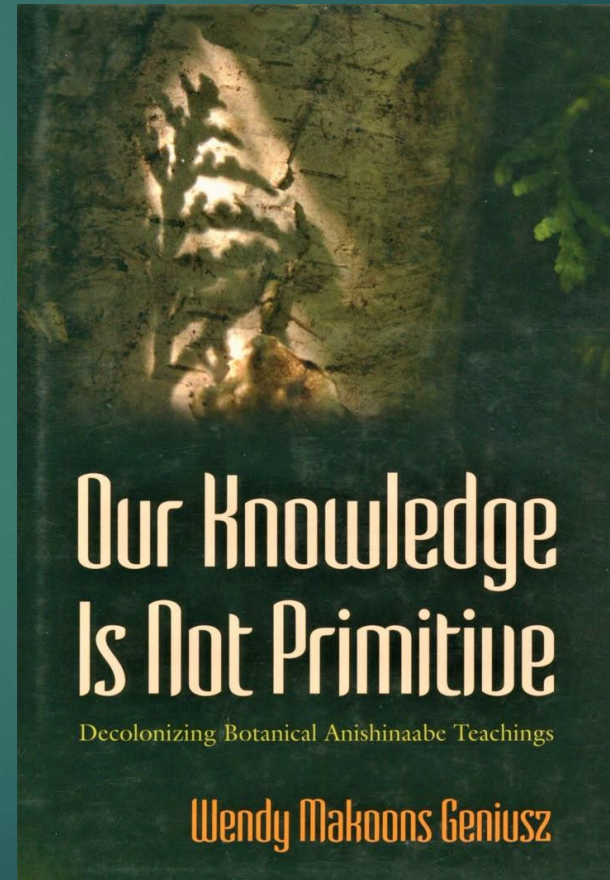
- But even if we don't have a definition, we can nonetheless have views about which specific entities (or types of entities) are in fact alive





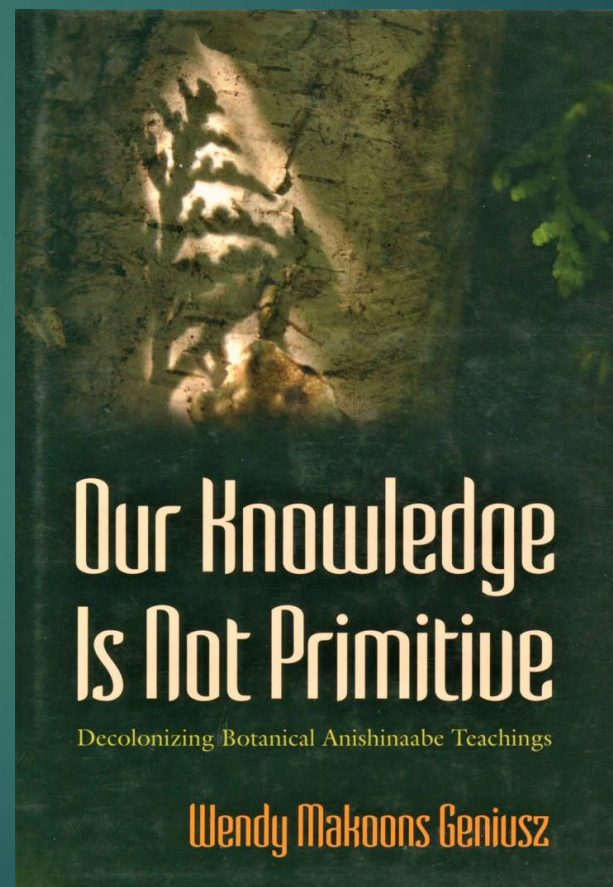
# Main Reading

- ▶ Our main reading for this week is Ch. 2 from this book
- ▶ The link on Quercus is to the whole book however, because some crucial parts of the story are outside of ch. 2
- ▶ Some of the words in it are in Anishinaabemowin, but there is a table with the most important words on p.11, and glossary starting on p. 190 with a more extensive list



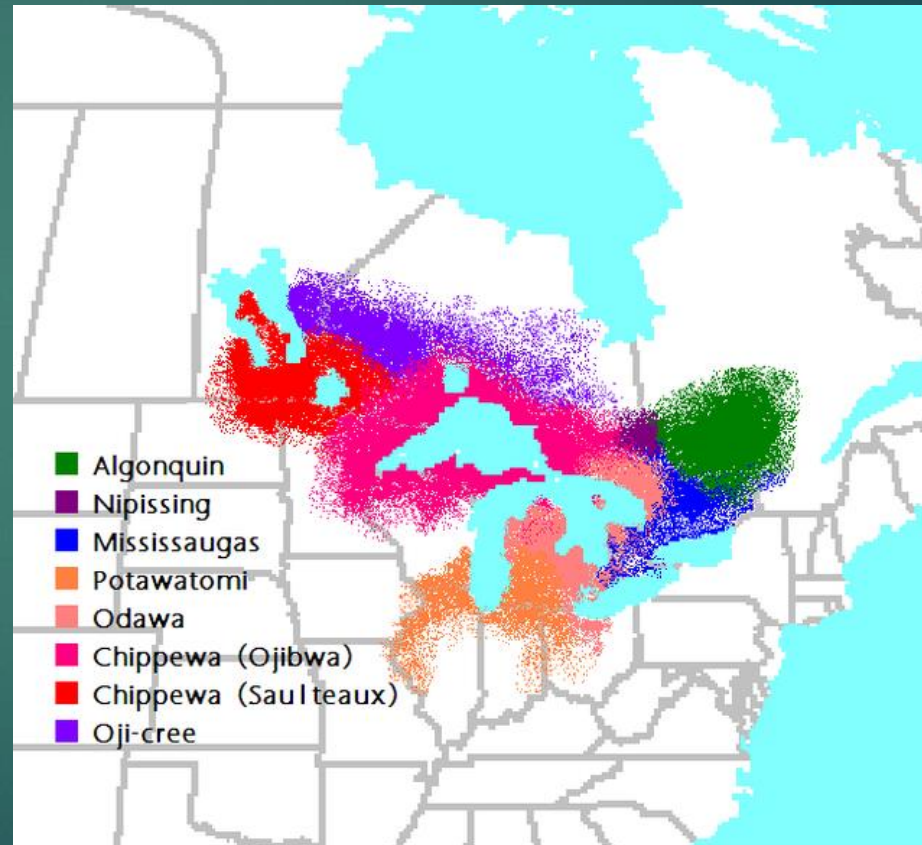
# Main Reading

- ▶ Overall the book is about finding ways to reclaim Anishinaabe teachings, particularly about plants, as tools for cultural revitalization
- ▶ The introduction and Ch.1 provide an overview of some of the main challenges to that project, and strategies for overcoming them
- ▶ We'll focus on Ch. 2, particularly the section titled "Categories of Animate and Inanimate within Inaadiziwin"
- ▶ But the context of the whole book is important



# The Anishinaabeg

- ▶ The Anishinaabeg (plural of Anishinaabe) are a group of First Nations that live in Canada and the US
- ▶ This group includes the Ojibwe, Chippewa, Odawa, Potawatomi, Algonquin, and Mississauga among others
- ▶ Geniusz cautions that what she writes is from her own specific experience within this broad collection of cultures, and may not apply in exactly the same way to all Anishinaabe teachings





# Forced Assimilation (genocide)

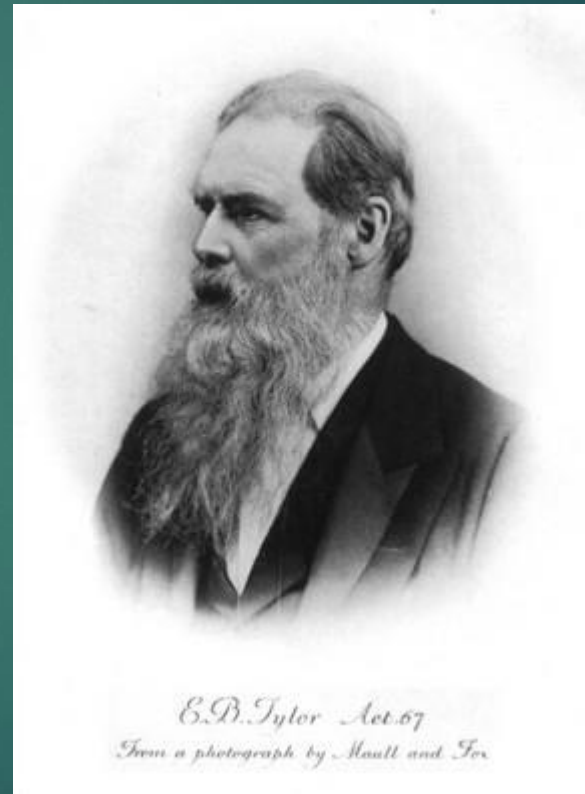
- ▶ Quite a lot of indigenous culture was destroyed, on purpose
- ▶ This isn't a conspiracy theory, this was the explicit stated policy of the British and then Canadian government for more than a century
- ▶ Many strategies were used, including compelled removal of indigenous children to residential schools, as well as forced sterilizations
- ▶ This helps to explain both Geniusz's project (establishing the tools for cultural revitalization) and why so much of what is known is incomplete





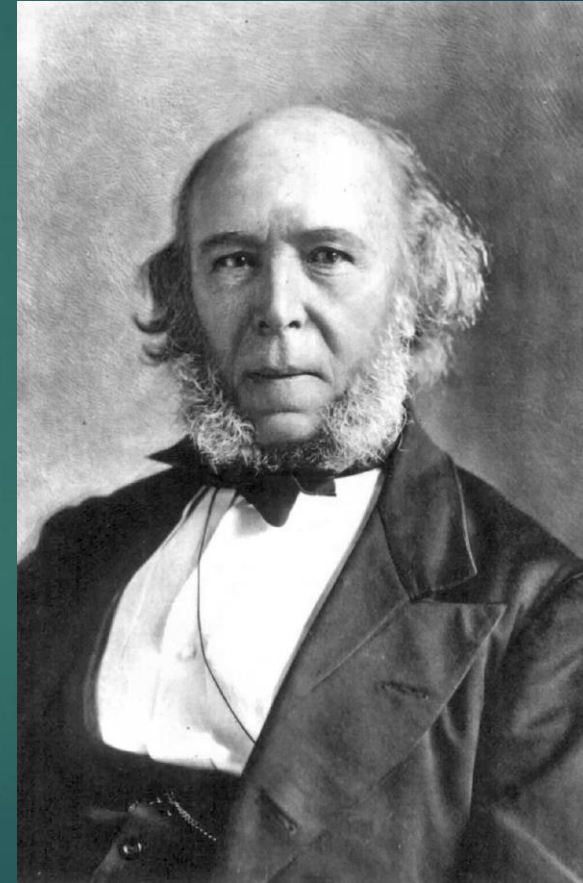
# The charge of “animism”

- ▶ One of the beliefs that was the target of this active suppression was the indigenous view of which parts of the world are animate, and which are inanimate
- ▶ Before we get to that, let's talk a bit about a term anthropologists used for indigenous worldviews since essentially the invention of anthropology, 'animism'
- ▶ It was coined by this guy, Edward Burnett Taylor (1832-1917), who is sometimes credited as the founder of cultural anthropology as a scientific discipline



# Evolutionism

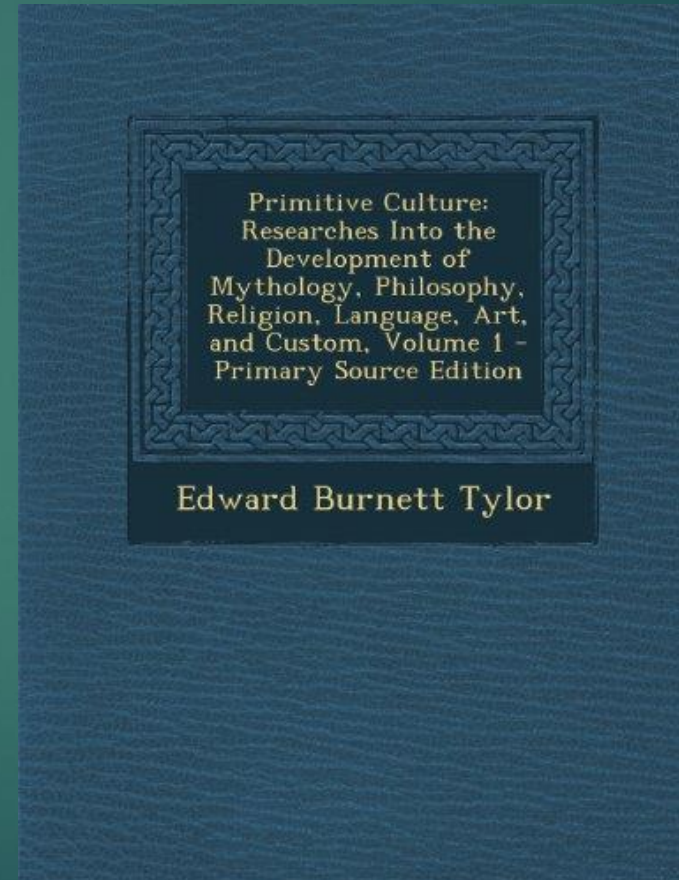
- ▶ Taylor subscribed to 'evolutionism', in the sense defined by Spencer
- ▶ Spencer argued that the universe as a whole was 'evolving' in that it was progressing towards greater heterogeny and complexity
- ▶ For Spencer, this applied to everything from stars to societies
- ▶ Taylor worked this basic belief into his analysis of cultures, with the idea that they went through various stages of development



Noted neck-beard Herbert Spencer

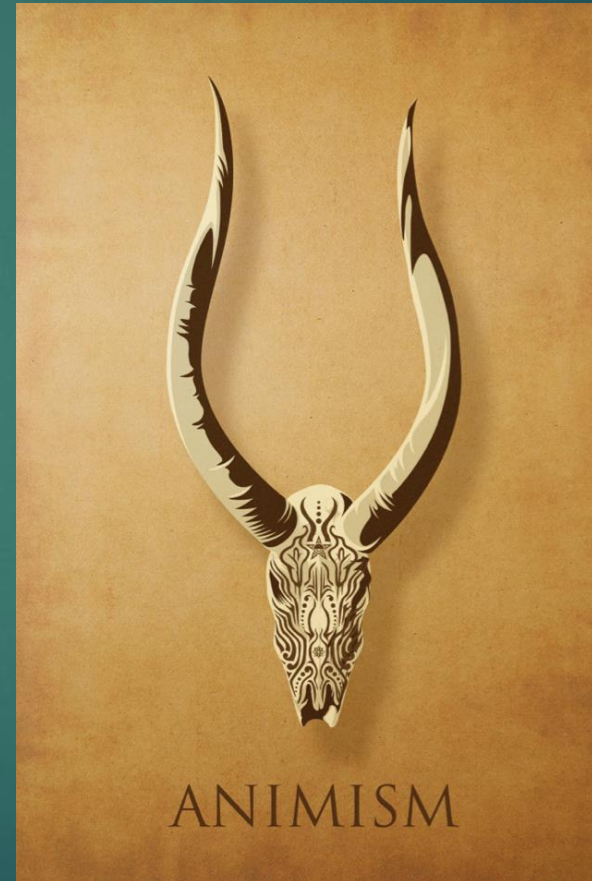
# Animism

- ▶ Taylor argues that every culture begins from a kind of religious starting point, “animism”
- ▶ That is, believing that the world is widely inhabited by life, and that life is widely animated by spirits
- ▶ He describes this as the (apparently) universal view of “lesser races”, which then evolves into the “higher” worldviews of, e.g., the British



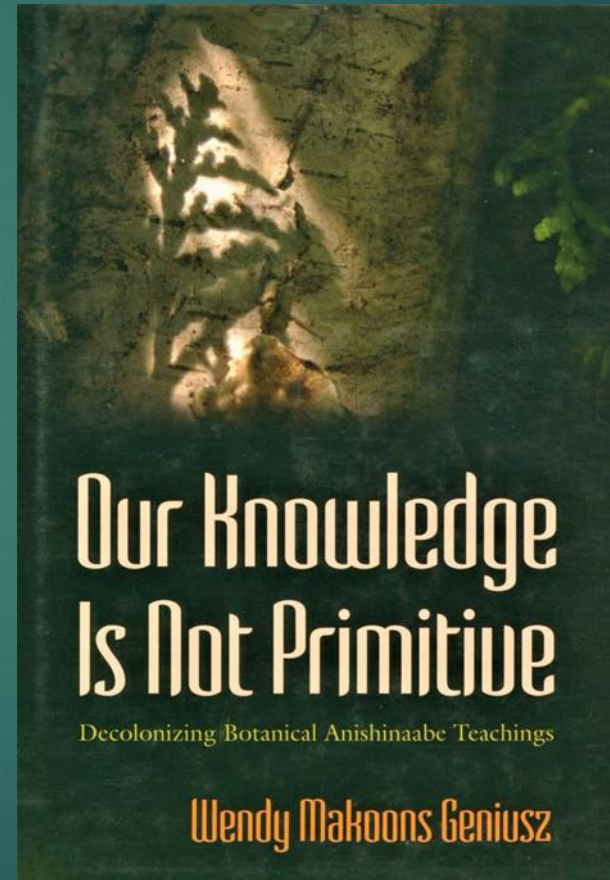
Wilkinson, D. (2017). Is there such a thing as animism?.  
Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 85(2),  
289-311.

- ▶ The term has fallen out of favour in anthropology, mostly because it's an insult disguised as a scientific term
- ▶ To call a culture 'animist' is essentially to say: they attribute animacy incorrectly, too widely
- ▶ Some attempts have been made to revive the term, but Wilkinson (2017) argues that these are ill-conceived
- ▶ Consider: who should regard themselves as believing in the "supernatural"?





- ▶ Geniusz spends most of the book talking about Anishinaabe botanical knowledge
- ▶ But she explains that understanding that knowledge requires understanding a densely interconnected set of other parts of the Anishinaabe worldview
- ▶ I'm not qualified to present that worldview here, but we can talk about some aspects of it
- ▶ And the author generously offered to talk to anyone who has further questions, so let me know if you do



# Animacy and Personhood

- ▶ “Inaadiziwin [psychology or way of being, in this case of the Anishinaabe] divides the world into categories of animate beings and inanimate objects differently than other philosophies. [...] Keewaydinoquay says that things such as rocks, trees, and plants, which are considered to be inanimate by the dominant society, are considered animate within Anishinaabe philosophy.” Geniusz (2009, p. 56)



White Cedar

# Animacy and Personhood

- ▶ This is more than just attributing the status of 'living thing' to a tree, which presumably everyone does
- ▶ Rather, it attributes personhood
- ▶ Just as with any personal connection, this relationship comes with responsibilities, and often benefits as well



White Cedar



# Gathering Plant Materials

- ▶ Geniusz describes the “Protocols for Gathering Materials From Plants and Trees” (p.60-63)
- ▶ First, an offering of asemaa (*nicotina rustica*) is given to the plant, sometimes by digging a small hole and placing a bit near the roots
- ▶ Then, a request and explanation is given to the plant



Image from: <https://sharedhealthmb.ca/news/2022-08-30-sharing-the-healing-spirit-of-sweetgrass/>



# Gathering Plant Materials

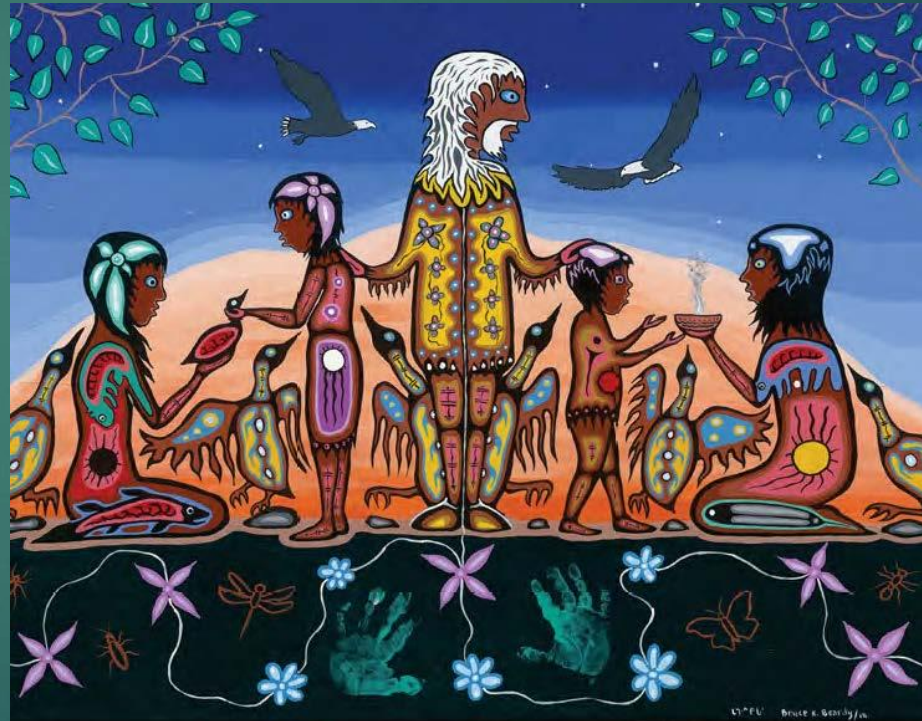
- ▶ One asks permission to gather some of it, explaining why one needs it
- ▶ One also makes assurance to the plant that only as much as needed will be collected, and that enough will be left that its descendants can survive
- ▶ If collecting a number of the same species, this may only need to be done once per visit



Image from: <https://sharedhealthmb.ca/news/2022-08-30-sharing-the-healing-spirit-of-sweetgrass/>

# Songs

- ▶ In addition to offerings and requests for permission, some plant materials require songs for gathering specific materials
- ▶ Nenabozho, a half-spirit/half-man, instructed the Anishinaabe to sing a particular song while root-gathering (p.62)
- ▶ Additionally, songs may be sung when specific medicines are prepared to encourage the appropriate spirits to offer their help



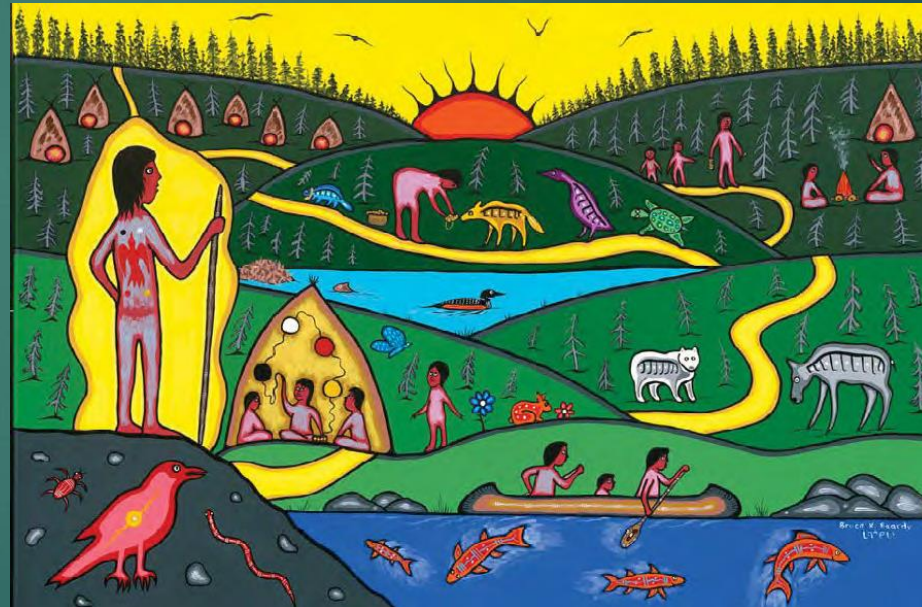
Art by Bruce Beardy

From: [https://pourparlerprofession.oeeo.ca/publications/professionally\\_speaking/2017-09/2017-09-Feature-Story-1-PS.asp](https://pourparlerprofession.oeeo.ca/publications/professionally_speaking/2017-09/2017-09-Feature-Story-1-PS.asp)



# Listening for a response

- ▶ Despite providing an offering, asking permission, etc., permission for collecting may not be given
- ▶ Note that this is a feature of all consent between persons – if there is no possibility of refusal, consent isn't really possible!
- ▶ Examples what this looks like are given on p. 64
- ▶ But just like with consent between humans, the description makes it sound unlikely that there are any necessary and sufficient signs for refusal



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# Permission and Plant Medicines

- ▶ Geniusz gives several recipes for plant medicines in the Appendix
- ▶ E.g., a tea foliage, a wart cream, and a skin balm based primarily on Giizhikaatig (white cedar)
- ▶ These are mechanically very straightforward recipes
- ▶ But relating to the tree as a person in the right ways is a necessary condition for making them, and without that, they lack something essential





# The Grandfathers

- ▶ Rocks too are regarded as persons
- ▶ When they are used for human purposes, the same sort of permission must be sought
- ▶ The example of breaking them into pieces for use in a path is given, and the same basic attitude of humble respect is required



# Life, Death, and Respect

- ▶ In previous weeks we worried a bit about the view that plants may be sentient – what are we supposed to eat then??
- ▶ But the Anishinaabe regard animals, plants, rocks, rivers, etc. as persons, deserving of respect, and also as sources of food, clothing, tools, medicine, etc.
- ▶ On p. 58, Geniusz provides an account of the ceremony held for a killed bear so their spirit to return to their village and convince other bears to allow themselves to be killed



Art by Brent Hardisty

<https://imagesboreales.com/en/artist/brent-hardisty/>



# Life, Death, and Respect

- ▶ This attitude that sometimes the risk or actuality of death may be worthwhile is not exclusive to non-humans
- ▶ On p. 71, Geniusz explains that, although the Anishninaabe would never be foolish enough to randomly experiment with plants to see if they were medicine, sometimes elders would volunteer to test out a hypothesized cure in times of serious need



Art by Brent Hardisty

<https://imagesboreales.com/en/artist/brent-hardisty/>



# The Balance of the World

- ▶ Anishinaabe philosophy considers the balance of the world as a primary ethical good
- ▶ The basic idea is that all elements of nature have a role to play, and through their interconnection each depends on the others
- ▶ P. 57 gives an account of the order in which various parts of the world were created
- ▶ First rocks, weather, and spirits, then plants and trees, then non-human animals, then humans

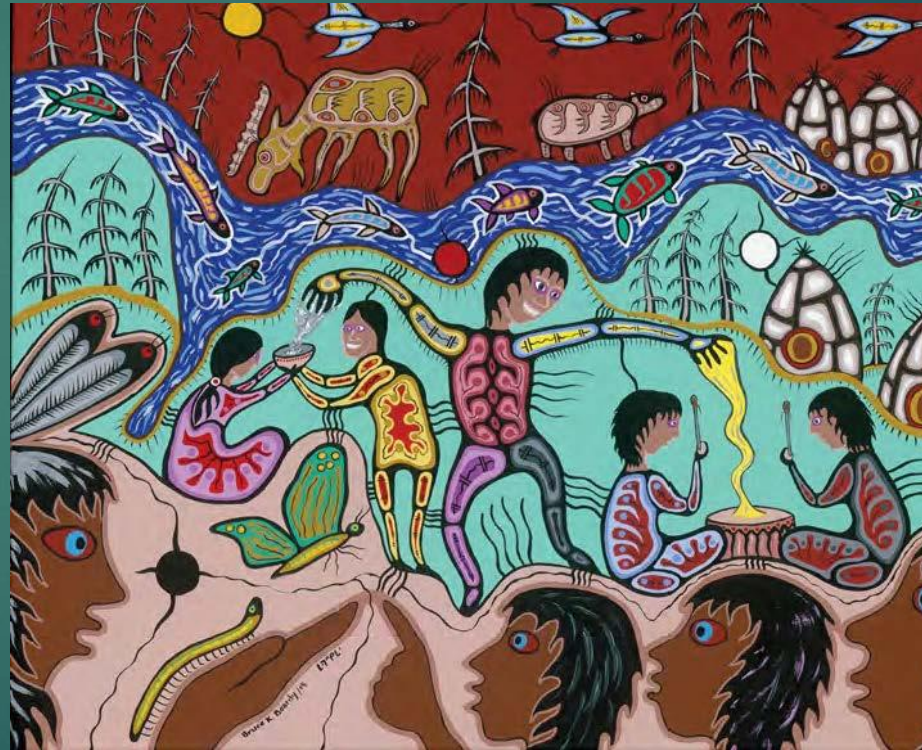


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# The Balance of the World

- ▶ Only the first layer of creation, rocks, weather, and spirits, could exist without the layer created previously
- ▶ But even that first layer, without the others, would be incomplete
- ▶ (If this order of creation seems to put humans 'on top', see the story on p. 127-136 to remedy that mistaken impression)



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# What should we think?

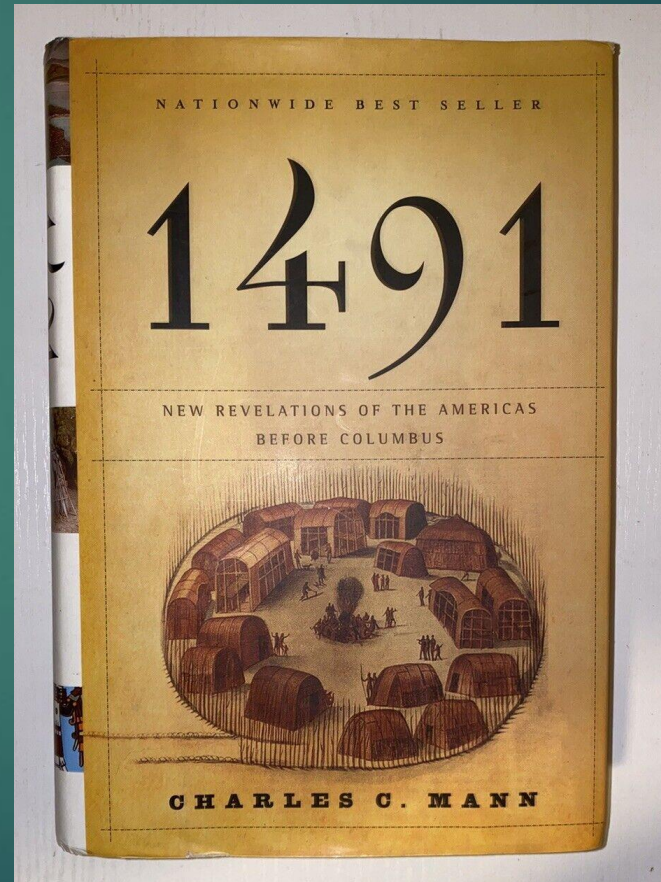
- ▶ I'm not saying you should believe all that
- ▶ These are little bits and pieces of a worldview, not the integrated thing itself
- ▶ Splitting off individual bits of a complex web of practices, stories, and relationships, and evaluating them as isolated pieces, is silly
- ▶ But we can talk a bit about the practical results of this and related worldviews





# Mistaking a Garden for a Paradise

- ▶ Charles Mann argues that Europeans who came to the Americas from 1492 onward made a profound mistake in interpreting what they saw
- ▶ They universally reported astonishment at how rich and full of life the continent was
- ▶ It looked like natural bounty to them, which is to say, something that just happened
- ▶ But what they were actually seeing was the result of millennia of careful stewardship by indigenous people



# Land Management

- ▶ One common tool for land management among various indigenous groups was controlled fires
- ▶ Intentionally starting fires that burned away dry brush and undergrowth was a widely used technique of land management
- ▶ Some groups used this to open up land for grazing animals
- ▶ This is commonly called a “cultural burn”, a weirdly dismissive term for effective land management

British Columbia

## Indigenous communities in B.C. and California promote cultural burns for disaster mitigation

More than 14,000 structures lost in L.A. fires



Santana Dreaver · CBC News · Posted: Jan 22, 2025 9:00 AM EST | Last Updated: January 22



Leah Mata-Fragua's cousin Pat Mata on cultural burn in California. (Submitted by Leah Mata-Fragua)



# Mistaking a Garden for a Paradise

“Sometime in the first millennium A.D., the [Haudenosaunee] who had burned undergrowth to facilitate grazing began systematically replanting large belts of woodland, transforming them into orchards for fruit and mast [...] From today’s perspective, the success of the transition is striking. It was so sweeping and ubiquitous that early European visitors marveled at the number of nut and fruit trees and the big clearings [which allowed animals to graze] with only a dim apprehension that the two might be due to the same human source.” (Mann p.301-302)





# Mistaking a Garden for a Paradise

- ▶ “One reason that Bartram failed to understand the artificiality of what he saw was that the surgery was almost without scars; the new landscape functioned smoothly. With few of the overreaches that plagued English land management.” (Mann p.302)
- ▶ Mann notes that European environmentalist movements often frame the indigenous relationship with the land as *non-interference*
- ▶ This is about the same as suggesting that we should have a policy of non-interference with our families and friends, rather than one of close interaction, mutual respect, and care



# Key Terms

- ▶ Spontaneous Generation
- ▶ “Animism”
- ▶ Anishinaabe Protocols for Gathering Materials From Plants and Trees



Next time:  
Strange Agents  
(featuring Emma Sigsworth)