Dorion Cairns' Contributions to a Phenomenology of Animism

Luis Román Rabanaque
Universidad Católica Argentina, CONICET

Abstract: The aim of the present paper is to advance some considerations on the question of animism from a phenomenological perspective. We firstly deal with the problems of the access to the phenomenon, and of its interpretation on the part of contemporary anthropology. Both problems are connected with the gap which seems to hold between so-called primitive, animistic societies, and so-called civilized, scientific cultures. Since Husserl does not devote specific analyses on this issue, we secondly address Dorion Cairns' methodology and concrete investigations. Our major claim is that his reflections, largely inspired by Husserl's notion of sense-transfer (*Sinnesübertragung*), may provide a better understanding of the gap and perhaps a way to overcome it by disclosing a genetic common root not only to animistic and modern mentalities, but also to pantheism and theism. A final section is devoted to Husserl's scattered considerations on the subject which might throw additional light on Cairns' claims.

Keywords: Husserl, Cairns, animism, sense-transfer, pantheism.

1. *Introduction*

Philosophical hermeneutics and Husserlian phenomenology share features not only in the elemental levels of *Verstehen* but also in higher order or founded levels of experience. They concern certain phenomena that cannot be directly addressed by means of straight (so to speak) reflective analysis on conscious acts, but require some interpretation in a sense very close to hermeneutics. If we consider ourselves as monads, that is, as concrete subjectivities living in the world through our bodies and bodily experience, we can distinguish: 1) our *self* from the world of nature, including our natural side connected with our body *qua* thing; 2) our self from the selves of Others, who can be either human or non-human; 3) our self from the side of ourselves that lies beyond our conscious control. These contrasts point to phenomena that cannot be straightforwardly analyzed by means of phenomenological reflective analysis; they rather appear as gaps or "abysses" for consciousness, the first one, before nature, the second one, before the Others, and the third one, before ourselves. One concrete phenomenon of the first class is offered by the phenomenological analysis of natural "things" like dinosaurs. They are not currently existing animals, and nobody was there who could tell us now of their being there when they were there. But we believe that those stones with bone-like shapes actually *are* (or have *been*) animals which inhabited the Earth some sixty million years ago, much before man first trod on it. Our belief is not simply motivated by their shapes, but we *interpret* them in order to constitute a dinosaur. Such interpretation does not simply follow the lines of a perceptual sense-giving of

hyletic data on the basis of what is presented together with our previously sedimented experience; it rather takes the percept itself as a basis for a higher-degree constitution. And the latter is in turn motivated by a sense transfer. Simply put, it is motivated by the transfer of sense from animal species with which we are actually—and currently—acquainted, like lizards and the like, whose bone shapes look similar to the stony bones of fossils. There is a transferring of the sense of animates to inanimates.

One phenomenon of the third kind would be the constitution of dreams, a very interesting and controversial topic with which I will not deal here. I wish to focus on the second group, that is, the one concerning the gap between oneself and the Others. In general terms, such a gap may involve either human or non-human Others; there is a gap here because I cannot fully constitute the sense of the Other in such a way that in principle, as it is the case with mere perceptual things, I could have all the senses, and all the adumbrations of those senses. Here again, as we shall see, the notion of sense transfer plays a crucial role. The particular class of phenomena I would like to address in this paper concerns the gap between oneself and those human Others who belong to so-called "primitive" cultures. One of the key features that allegedly distinguishes such societies from our Western, scientific and philosophic culture is their belief in a thoroughly animated world, that is, their *animism*. Let me begin with some general and historical considerations on this topic.

2. *Some Historical Remarks on Animism*

Animism is a complex issue that can be addressed in many ways, and it has thus given rise to a vast literature among scientists and philosophers. For scientists it has been a major issue both in the disciplines of ethnology and anthropology. For philosophers it has often been a topic of the history of philosophy, so e.g. in the context of the characterization of hylozoism among the pre-Socratic thinkers in the dawn of Western philosophy. As to the former, two chief modalities seem to have largely prevailed in empirical investigations on animism, one predominantly descriptive and comparative, contrasting so-called high civilizations with so-called "primitive" societies by stressing their differences, the other predominantly evolutionary, seeking to reconstruct the origins of animism and thus the transit from primitive to civilized man (Willerslev 2011: 507).

Even though the notion is much older, the term "animism," built on the Latin word for soul, *anima*, seems to have been first coined as a medical term in the early 18th Century by the German physician and chemist Georg Stahl. One hundred years later the French philosopher Auguste Comte advanced its anthropological sense by tracing back the sources of religion in what he called 'fetishism' (Comte 1844: 3), an idea that the Scottish Edward Burnett Tylor was to take up again in his influential book on *Primitive Culture* (Tylor 1871). Tylor proposed a study of "the deep-lying doctrine of Spiritual Beings" (Tylor 1871: 384) as the "groundwork of the Philosophy of Religion, from that of savages up to that of civilized men" (Tylor 1871: 385). Animism embraces for him two main ideas, one "concerning *souls* of

individual creatures, capable of continued existence after the death or destruction of the body," and the other "concerning other *spirits*, upward to the rank of powerful deities" (ibid, italics mine). Such spirits have control over things and men and can also be to some extent controlled and worshipped (Tylor 1871: 386). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries these ideas were further developed by evolutionary anthropologists like Lucien Lévy-Bruhl in France, James Frazer in England and William Hocking in the USA, the latter having been addressed by Dorion Cairns, as we shall see. Common to them is the attempt to trace the origins of animism in "primitive" features of underdeveloped societies, whose mind's shaping is meant to be similar to that of children before coming to mature age. Lévy-Bruhl even goes so far as to declare the "logic" of primitives to be entirely different from our Western logical thinking.[1]

Comte, Tylor, Frazer or Lévy-Bruhl describe the mentality of primitives but at the same time they ascribe to it a certain value measured from the point of view of modern scientific consciousness. We in the West are taught, sometimes at home and then surely at school and high school, to reject animism in favor of what we may call the scientific world-view, after which the animation of inanimate entities is a childish belief and, if we are Cartesians in addition, even animates like plants and lower animals have no "soul" in the sense that they are alive but lack any trace of conscious life. Comte as representative of this scientific mentality goes on to assume that animism in the social realm is parallel to animism in the development of the individual, so that the primitive somehow equals the child's immature mind but at social scale. And such a value-laden description gives rise naturally to the idea of an evolution in both sides: the child becomes first a teenager and later an adult, and primitive communities in long periods of time "evolve" from childish animism into mature-thinking societies like our scientific one (Comte 1830: 7/3).

All this seems to deepen the gap between Western and non-Western cultures, as well as to assess the superiority of the former inasmuch as they allegedly have been able to overcome animism and see the real world as it *really* is. I think

---

[1] When criticizing the Anglo-Saxon direction of anthropology, notably in Tylor and Frazer, Lévy-Bruhl points out that its more conspicuous and at the same time arguable presupposition is that of the identity of the human spirit. He adds that animism is the outcome of this idea: "We know in advance that this spirit is not different among them [sc. the primitives] and among us. All that is left to investigate is how mental functions which are identical with ours have been able to produce those representations and those connections" (Lévy-Bruhl 1922: 7. All translations from this book are mine). For him this hypothesis has two elements, on the one side they believe that what appears in dreams, like the dead, have an actual existence "as separable soul," as "ghosts". On the other side, they try to explain the causes of natural phenomena by means of those spirits, souls and their "wills," "similar to those they believe to have confirmed in themselves, in their partners, in animals" (Lévy-Bruhl 1922: 8). He also objects that a further presupposition is that of the individual origin of such beliefs, while in most cases they are collective representations. Thus it is false that, as Tylor claims, "The spirits are personified causes" (Lévy-Bruhl 1922: 16). Lévy-Bruhl's point here is that we should not project our own modern mentality to the mentality of primitive cultures. On the contrary, "the collective representations of the primitives deeply differ from our ideas or concepts; they are not equivalent to them" (Lévy-Bruhl 1922: 30). And they are not because they do not possess logical characters, and also because they are not representations properly since they are not images but influences, virtues or powers emanating from the things. He speaks thus of "mystical" mental activities (*ibid.*).

that a phenomenological approach to this issue might throw some light on this gap or abyss. Husserl does not seem to have addressed himself the subject, although he certainly reflected upon the question of cultural diversity including mythically-minded societies.[2] But the writings of Dorion Cairns, arguably Husserl's most important disciple in the United States, provide some very insightful and challenging phenomenological analyses on animism. He sketches a phenomenological account of animism that is mainly based on Husserl's notion of sense-transfer, and from which he draws remarkable conclusions. While for anthropologists like Lévy-Bruhl there seems to be a real abyss between ourselves as Westerners and the so-called primitive societies, for Cairns just the opposite seems to hold good: there is in principle no distinction between the primitive and the civilized mind with reference to animism, since for both the beginning is set on the level of animism, a level where no sharp distinction between the edges of the abyss has yet been drawn, and hence there is rather continuity instead of disruption. Cairns is not concerned with evolution either in ontogenic or phylogenic terms, but with the conditions of possibility of such developments—regardless of their empirical shaping and of the question whether the primal stages should be labeled as primitive and the later ones as developed. On the contrary, he points to the fact that even in our normal, adult, scientifically shaped behavior some hints of animism can easily be found and furthermore, that pantheism and theism as reflective, theoretically constructed ideas are ultimately founded on that primal layer of the animistic interpretation of the world.

3. *Some Remarks on Dorion Cairns' Methodological Procedure*

In recent years, Lester Embree has published some important manuscripts from Dorion Cairns' *Nachlass* or legacy (Embree 2012). The most relevant texts where Cairns discusses the topic of animism have been compiled in Study n. 3 under the title "Applications of the theory of sense-transfer".[3] But a word on *methodology* is needed before going further on. As Embree remarks, Cairns accepted Husserl's method of "reflective theoretical observation and eidetic analysis," but instead of Husserl's transcendental involvement with an Ego for addressing intersubjectivity, as it occurs in the latter's *Cartesian Meditations*, he proposes a "psychological *epochē*" which refrains from accepting real, i.e. temporal and causal relations between mental life and the things in the world, and considers the noesis—noema correlation solely in terms of intention or, better, intentiveness and correlative things-as-intended-to.[4] This is in turn related to a revision of Husserl's *Abbau-Aufbau* method for genetic analysis, since Cairns criticizes Husserl's decision to begin the *Abbau* ("unbuilding") procedure with a reduction to the sphere of ownness. He advocates a reduction that abstracts from both Ego-centered activity and secondary automaticity or habituality in order to lay bare a stratum of primary

---

[2] See for example Hua XV, 436, Hua XXVII, 188–190, Hua XXIX, 3.
[3] Embree had already published this text, with slight differences, in Cairns 2007.
[4] See Embree 2012, Introduction to Study n. 2: 34–35.

automaticity whose noematic correlate is the natural world (Embree 2012: 37). A second step in such unbuilding is the reduction to the primordial world, where the strata in which the Others are constituted are abstracted from, and a third one is that which uncovers the "phantom world" where causality is abstracted from and only sensing and sensa remain (Embree 2012: 40–41). *Sensing* and *sensa* reflect Cairns' critical revision of Husserl's concepts of *morphé* or noesis and *hyle* or sensation.[5]

The methodological reverse of such un-building is building-up, a procedure that starts by the lower stratum and then re-constructs the whole. The most important thing that is intended-to in phantom and primordial experience is the body as living or animated body (*Leib*), by means of which the Others are also constituted. And at the bottom, the transit from my own body as intended-to, to the Other's body as intended-to, is made possible by the particular kind of associative synthesis which Husserl calls *Sinnesübertragung*, and which Cairns renders into English as "sense-transfer" (Embree 2012: 45, 52; see also Embree 2006: 86). What Cairns has in mind here is not a factual description of animism in primitive mentalities, which at any event would be an issue for anthropology, but a phenomenological account of the origins of animism; this is clear from his remarks on Hocking's work on Spiritualism, as we shall see in Section 7. As far as he is looking for the "roots" of Spiritualism, he is not performing a straightforward reflective analysis, even though his procedure includes descriptions, but he is mainly rationally reconstructing a development that, as such, cannot be "seen" with the same degree of evidence that straightforward phenomena in reflection allow to. When Husserl introduces genetic analysis, he already points out that this procedure is not descriptive (*beschreibende*) but explicative (*erklärende*) in the sense that it does not simply account for what is presently given, but it should *explicate* the horizons *implicated* in what is immediately given. This is the primary sense of his *Abbau-Aufbau* method, which Cairns explicitly assumes. Cairns' wrestling with animism is the result of an *Abbau* process of de-construction of sense-transfer layers which, in full-fledged concrete experience, lie hidden behind temporal strata of sedimentation.

4. *Sense-transfer and Primordial Credulity*

As Lester Embree points out, Cairns had already addressed the topic of universal sense-transfer in his Harvard Dissertation of 1933 (Embree 2012: 50).[6] Later, in a Course on the 'Problems in Transcendental Phenomenology" dated on spring 1960, he summarizes his main theses on the subject. His approach to the question of animism is bound not only to the notion of *sense-transfer* but also to two other key notions, *primary automaticity*, and *primordial credulity*. He starts by remarking that "the full effect of automatic associative transfer of the sense 'my organism' has not been made explicit in those of Husserl's writings with which I am acquainted"

---

[5] This critique is discussed by Cairns in Embree 2012: 89–112 (Study 4).
[6] Now published as Dorion Cairns 2013. See especially Chapter 26 and footnote 11: 289.

(Embree 2012: 50). Now the most important source for the clarification of his claims is offered by the "Outline of Presentation" for a General Seminar in the Graduate Faculty at the New School, which Cairns delivered the same year. This is the text that Embree has published as the aforementioned "Applications of the Theory of Sense-Transfer" (Embree 2012: 50–88).[7]

Cairns begins by establishing the general meaning of the notion of *sense-transfer*, which he understands as the transport of the sense imputed from one thing to another thing or things. He first observes that underlying any transfer process a previous condition is involved, namely that of intending something as self-identical and distinct from something else, a condition which, following Husserl, is related to continuous syntheses of identification and distinction (Embree 2012: 53). Once a self-identical thing is constituted in such continuous syntheses, its noematic sense is passively ascribed to other things intended to (Embree 2006: 86). This is clear from what Cairns calls the most primitive case of sense-transfer, namely, the sensuous presentation of two things in the perceptual field, like two grey figures, say, one round and one square. They are seen, first of all, as self-identical and distinct from the other, but at the same time, they are grasped as similar or different from the other. Cairns claims that, in this case, "the presented sense of each is 'transferred' *automatically* to the other, so that both agree or disagree, and they do wholly or partially, thus being confirmed or cancelled" (Embree 2012: 54). For this reason, he adds, there are not only positive but also negative senses (negative properties). The two shapes *are grey*, but the round figure is *not*-square, and the latter is *not*-round (Embree 2012: 55). What is at stake in this kind of primitive intentional process is *primary automaticity*, which is Cairns' (critical) translation of Husserl's notion of primary or originary passivity (*Urpassivität*) as opposed to secondary passivity (*sekundäre Passivität*) or habituality (*Habitualität*).[8] The former is automatic in the sense that the Ego is not actively engaged in it, while the latter presupposes activity and the preservation or sedimentation of its results.

Furthermore, Cairns observes that the transferred sense is attributed, and remains so, unless something else conflicts with it, and outweighs it. On the one side, there is a "preconceptual presumption" whereby processes going on in another organism, like gestures, attitudes, or behaviour, may express corresponding mental processes in that organism, provided that such bodily processes sufficiently resemble those my body would have if the other body were my own (Embree 2012: 64). And on the other side, there is a propensity to simply accept this resemblance. Such a "primordial credulity," as Cairns calls it, inspired by William James, underlies any active tendency to doubt or disbelieve: "there is a fundamental tendency to believe in a likeness of everything to everything else [that] may be strengthened, weakened, or cancelled by another motive" (Embree 2012: 68–69). Even in case of doubt, of a vague representation, "the primordial attitude toward the vague […] is simple acceptance, and this owing to primordial credulity" (Embree 2012: 70). In

---

[7] The exposition has been arranged in two parts, the first consisting in a summary of theses written down by Cairns as a guide for his lecturing, and the second composed by Embree himself in the form of a virtual dialogue between Cairns and some colleagues.
[8] *Cf.* Hua IV: 12; Husserl 1964: 119. See Embree 2006: 83.

Husserl's terms, we could say that these passively or automatically transferred senses are intended along with their noematic *Seinscharaktere*, that is, they are senses posited by a passive doxa. And we can further remark that the motivations underlying such primordial credulity do not only include purely doxothetic but also valuing and practical motivations. This must of course be extended to the *horizonal* features that are not presented, as it is too the case with artefacts, e.g. when a hammer is seen as capable of hammering albeit it is not actually in function. And even though no other mind than mine can be presented to me, parts of the other's mind can appear "in a broader sense, *within* the horizons of my experience" of them (Embree 2012: 66).

5. *Universal Sense-transfer and Animism*

Now besides sense-transfer between objects in the world, Husserl's best-known use of this notion concerns the constitution of Others. Cairns addresses Husserl's Fifth Cartesian Meditation in order to show that the experiencing of the Other is a special case of sense-transfer synthesis (which he also calls "assimilative" synthesis) (Embree 2012: 56). Cairns describes it as the automatic attribution of a mental life to physical things presented as physically similar to my presented physical organism (ibid.). Thus the sense "organism connected with a mental life" is transferred to other bodies other than my organism. Although this automatic attribution is originated in *my* own organism, Cairns observes that the latter's sense is not imputed as *mine*: "[…] the sense 'mine' is, of course, cancelled". Consequently the transfer is brought about "[…] between an intended *variant* of my organism […] and that body" (*ibid.*; italics mine).

At this point Cairns goes further on and claims that the sense "psychophysical thing" presented to oneself in the primordial world "is automatically transferred to absolutely *all* other things intended to" (Embree 2007: 86; emphasis mine). Following Cairns, " […] on his own principles [sc. Husserl's], the transfer occurs automatically in the case of *any body*" (Embree 2012: 57; italics mine), that is, *every* thing is in principle apperceived as an 'animated' *body*. He argues that one tends to *cease* experiencing the other body as conscious only when it fails to fulfill the presumptive style of the future on the basis of past experience. Thus inanimateness has a *privative* character which can only arise when the thing's behavior *refutes* the automatic sense-transfer of animateness. An example of such rebutting would be a thing whose movements give little or no support to being apperceived as having a will (Embree 2012: 59). Such a thing would not appear as having sense-fields like the tactual, thermal, etc., and as being able to control its movements, thus "giving cognizance of minds, their states, and their processes" (Embree 2012: 61).[9]

But all this would only happen at the higher level of active, theoretical thinking. At the lower level of primary automaticity, "[…] there is perhaps no

---

[9] Cairns' analysis of the animated body come close to Husserl's descriptions of the *Leib* in the Second Book of the *Ideas*. See Hua IV: 284).

complete cancellation of the transferred sense 'organism' (Embree 2012: 51). If the transferred senses "other mind" and "other organism" cannot be completely cancelled, then "there is panpsychism, also pantheism, and even animation of abstracta, of idealities" (Embree 2012: 51). This panpychism or universal animism[10] has for Cairns two sides; it is both pluralistic inasmuch as the presentable *things* in the world are plural, and monistic insofar as the presented *world* is one. Although he does not further explain this assertion, he seems to be mindful here of Husserl's distinction between the *uniqueness* of the world as universal horizon and the open *plurality* of things within this world-horizon (Hua VI: 146).[11] It is important to note that in both cases this universal animistic attribution is the result of automatic apperception and *not* a product of active phantasy that would project life on previously inanimate things.[12] That is the reason why he argues that this sense-transfer is located at the level of automatism or primary passivity: automatic transfer is prior to and fundamental for any imaginative conferring life to an object because the latter presupposes, or better, is founded on a "serious" (that is, doxically positing) meaning of that object as inanimate, a meaning that has to be cancelled in order to be endowed with a fantastic sense. However, as we noted, this occurs at the level of activity, and thus it is not a passive cancellation (Embree 2012: 63).[13]

6. *Socio-Cultural Animism*

Since primordial credulity includes not only individual but also—and mainly—social acceptance, the next step consists in analysing the question of animism from a social point of view. Cairns first observes that "wherever we experience social behaviour, we experience the mental processes of others" (Embree 2012: 69). And at the pre-theoretical level "we restrict the realm of believed-in sociality […] because things of a certain kind disappoint our *social expectations*" (Embree 2012: 72; emphasis mine). This is the case e.g. with things like stones and rivers, mountains and sky, whose "behaviour" does not fulfil the pre-theoretical expectations of being bodies of minds. Remarkably, however, we still tend to speak of a "smiling sky" or a "menacing mountain's peak," and although most people in the West usually do not believe in spirits inhabiting the mountains, many believe explicitly or implicitly in a "purposing mind expressed by the world as

---

[10] We take these two words as synonyms now, but we will propose a distinction later. See below, Section 7.

[11] See also Cairns' conversation with Husserl and Fink on 25th October 1932 in Cairns 1976: 97–99.

[12] Interestingly, Husserl would agree with this claim. In one place he says that "the 'animistic' apprehension is not an invention or a construct of the natural man's phantasy, but his experience," and he adds that "only because it is his experience can it be refuted by other experiences […] as illusion" (Hua XLII: 206. Translation mine).

[13] Cairns mentions at this point the case of those Cartesian philosophers who regard all non-human animals as inanimate; although they theoretically, that is, actively support that claim, they nevertheless "must still have *experienced* higher animals as psychophysical objects with perceiving and feeling" (Embree 2012: 63; emphasis by Cairns).

a whole" (*ibid*.). The source of this belief is not to be considered as either speculative or emotional; it is motivated by a transfer of sense such that the "causes" we experience in ourselves when we produce e.g. our voluntary movements are associatively transferred to things. By progressively becoming aware that events in the world follow typical sequences, one acquires the belief in their "causal" connection, i.e. the belief in "a rough typical style of the world". Such style ought not to be understood as an exact or even deterministic causality in the sense of the natural sciences, but rather as a "behaviour" that at its most elementary level proceeds after "the most familiar experienced causal sequence: the will and the deed" (Embree 2012: 73). A similar statement is familiar to us from Husserl's *Crisis*. Husserl observes that, in contrast with the pure geometrical abstractions of natural science, the things in our concretely perceived world are experienced in sensibly typical ways as belonging together. Things in our intuited concrete world "have, so to speak, their 'habits'—they behave similarly under typically similar circumstances," so that the world has an "empirical over-all style" (Hua VI: 28/31). Again, only the failure to find confirmation for such typical anticipations gives rise to seeing things as inanimate, but Cairns once more emphasizes that even then the transition "is neither abrupt nor complete on the pretheoretical level" (Embree 2012: 73). This could explain why traces of this basic animism are preserved even at the theoretical level, and mirrored in the sedimented sense-layers of language; as Cairns recalls, in our ordinary speech we seriously mean that water "seeks" its own level, or that a magnet "attracts" iron filings, and so on. Furthermore, when a poet speaks of nature as "smiling" or a mountain's peak as "menacing," she is *not* adding something "new" to our original experience but she is actually suspending "the effect of our later experience" (*ibid*.). By reflecting upon what the poet does we may discover that universal, "primal" animism is to some extent *neutralized* in later experience, such that its apparent "cancellation," as Cairns says, is not really a suppression but rather a suspension, an entering or sinking into secondary automaticity. This usually enduring neutralization can, on the one hand, be released by poetic experience, as Cairns observes, but it also leaves, on the other hand, "traces" in our everyday adult non-animistic behaviour. Infantile or primitive animism leaves vestiges that remain present, though unnoticed, in our adult relation to the world. And this could also be extended to our interpretation of dreams.[14]

7. *Animism from a Theoretical Point of View*

After describing animism in its most salient features, Cairns observes that the tendency to interpret everything as animated "works itself out in primitive worldviews" (Embree 2012: 73). He then engages in a discussion of animism on the scientific and philosophical level by addressing William Ernest Hocking's book on the *Types of Philosophy* (Hocking 1929). Hocking, who attended Husserl's lectures on logic in the winter semester 1902/03 and was later to become acquainted with

---

[14] Cairns mentions the question of dreams in the context of a brief discussion about personal survival after death, see Embree 2012: 82 s.

Cairns,[15] advances in his book the idea of a "proto-philosophy" that would underlie religious beliefs and which he calls "Spiritualism". The Spiritualist assumes that there is another world alongside the one we are acquainted with through our senses, a world that is veiled from our ordinary experience, "yet it is continuous with nature" and is the residence of agencies which are addressed as 'divine', having superiority both in power and in worth. Such condition does not preclude the possibility of dealing with those spirits, and the souls of men, "or some of them, pass over at death into this other world" (Hocking 1929: 29). He further asks for the sources of Spiritualism and recognizes the speculative, the emotional and the ethical "roots" (*ibid.*). According to the speculative root there must be a creator of the world, or a number of co-operating creators (Hocking 1929: 31); according to the emotional root, the divine is not only a power but it has a quality and a value, it is 'holy' or 'sacred' (*ibid.*); finally, according to the ethical source, the divine calls for a moral requirement (Hocking 1929: 32).

Cairns' interest here is to show that "the origins of the belief included by Hocking under the title 'Spiritualism'" lie prior to all spontaneous theorizing (Embree 2012: 75). He points out that what Hocking sees as the "roots" of Spiritualism in the sense of the basis for believing in non-human spirits, should be found in the passive associative transfer of what we experience in ourselves to the things that surround us (Embree 2012: 80). That is, in such a condition we do *not*—even "proto-philosophically"—*infer* that bodies other than our own are organs expressing feelings and willings, but we *perceive* them "immediately" so (Embree 2012: 76).[16] This may have led primitive man to experiencing the spirits of things as having both consciousness in general and consciousness of *himself*, that is, human attitudes toward himself and furthermore, it may have led him to see *social* relationships among the spirits themselves (Embree 2012: 79). The latter in turn allows the intertwining of spiritual and human social relationships, thus giving rise to a threefold possibility of social relations, namely, with other *humans*, with *sub*-humans like animals and plants, and with *super*-humans like demons and gods. This is of course related to the way the transferred sense imputed to the other differs from the sense of oneself, the degree of difference being responsible for seeing the other as more, less or equally human than oneself. As a further consequence, since in social groups *group minds* are ascribed, as when we speak of "the will of the people," a mind can be conceived of which the whole world is the body, and that would be a "preconceptual pantheism" (Embree 2012: 80). God would then be the mind governing the world as its own body and with his own will.

This difference in degree of the imputed animism to other bodies has thus a *relative* character. At the theoretical level, sense-transfer of humans, sub-humans,

---

[15] See Schuhmann 1977: 73. Paul Natorp had advised him to move to Göttingen, see Schuhmann 1994: 90. Hocking was one of Cairns' professors at Harvard.
[16] Such a "proto-theory" would require what James Hart calls an "over-belief," that is, a kind of metaphysical theory that imputes life to non-living things like stones. On the contrary, what Cairns suggests is set on a lower level, that of experience prior to metaphysical, that is, active-theoretical, attitude (see Hart 2009: 365).

and super-humans can be distinguished, but these *conceptual* differences have their origin at the lowest, "sub-conceptual" level of experience (Embree 2012: 81). When made by children or by primitive adults such distinctions are not so sharp, e.g. the contrast between themselves and animals is not so acute. For children adults appear as superhuman while for Western adults primitive adults may appear as subhuman. As Cairns fairly observes, to children adults are not gods, but gods are adults (Embree 2012: 82).

8. *Pantheism and Theism*

Now Cairns' theory of universal sense-transfer has two important consequences which are related to the discussion of Spiritualism. At the elementary level of primary automaticity there is for Cairns not only a universal animism, but also pantheism in the sense that "the whole physical world is the organism of a mind," and theism in the sense that "the world is an artifact" (Embree 2012: 57). The world in our everyday experience is not only filled with natural bodily things like stones and rivers, plants and animals, or human beings like ourselves. There are also *artefacts*, products of human handicraft that fulfil human purposes. Cairns claims that this sense as artefacts is also transferred, although not to particular things but to the *world* itself: "the whole world is thus presumed, pre-theoretically, to be an 'artifact'" (Embree 2012: 85). This is however not the same as the belief in something like God's mind governing over the world as its body. Cairns suggests that both beliefs actually run parallel. There is on the one hand the sense of the world as God's body; this world-mind is "in" the world much in the way I am "in" my own body. There is on the other hand the sense of the world as God's handiwork, that is, a creator who is "outside" the world just in the way an artist is "outside" her work of art. *Pantheism* can then be defined as the belief that there is a supreme God who is the spirit animating the world, whereas *theism* is the belief that there is a supreme God who is the spirit creating the world. If so, every one of us is, at this lower level of experience, "both a 'pantheist' and a 'theist'" (Embree 2012: 86). Cairns stresses once again that these sense-transfer processes take place at the automatic level which is prior to all theory: Only from a theoretical point of view these two transfers can be called pantheism and theism—without quotation marks—, but the origins, the 'roots' of the corresponding beliefs are not located at the level of active, theoretical thinking but at the subconceptual level of automatic sense-transfer. Now I think that in order to clarify these notions a little better it would be helpful to recall again the phenomenological difference between the experience of *things* in the world, and the experience of the *world* itself. We mentioned it in the context of Cairns' characterization of universal animism as both pluralistic and monistic (see above, Section 5). Animism in its pluralistic sense as panpsychism is connected with the occurrence of things in the world, which appear or disappear as bodies animated by souls, as "bodies of minds". Animism in its monistic sense is connected with both pantheism and theism because they are related to the world-experience and not to thing-experience. In panpsychism there

is a transfer of sense from my body to other bodies, while in pantheism and theism there is a transfer of sense from my body to the world, which is not and cannot be a "thing" among things.

9. *Complement: Edmund Husserl on Animism*

We have mentioned Husserl several times during our discussion of Cairns' views. As I stated at the beginning, Husserl never undertook a thoroughgoing examination of animism or of so-called primitive cultures. However, in his later work we can find some scattered but significant remarks. I would like to summarize some of those which may complement or throw more light on Cairns' claims:

(1) His reflections about Lévy-Bruhl's anthropological work on primitive mentalities. As Professor Ales Bello nicely points out, Husserl addresses the topic here from the point of view of Western thought, thus looking for the differences rather than for the connections (Ales Bello 2009: 89–90). In a late manuscript on Lévy-Bruhl, Husserl reflects upon the difference between the European culture and the so-called primitive cultures, pondering their contrasting features. He also addresses the question of animism incidentally by referring to the "*Untergrund*" of animism in animal behaviour, that is, reflecting on the contrast between man and animal (Ms. K III 7 (1935), page V front, transcription, 10).[17] Cairns speaks of sub-humans in contrast to humans and super-humans. Subhuman would be animals and animal-like creatures. Husserl thinks that animism cannot be ascribed to animals; there is no continuity between them and humans in that respect. He compares both regarding various features which include basic instincts like hunger, sexual impulses, relationships with other species and with things, empathy, ego-centering, habits, education, judging, language, remembering, capacity to make artefacts, history, and warfare.

(2) Husserl recognizes the animate organism or corporeity (*Leiblichkeit*), and thus the possibility of a transfer of the soul-sense, not only from myself to animal and personal Others but also to things of the kind of artifacts. Cultural objects like tools, machines, household appliances and the like have a "cultural" corporeity, which is animated (*beseelt*) with a sense given by the subject who uses it or understands it as a cultural device (see Hua IV, 241; 243; Hua IX, 116).

(3) Husserl further extends this property to purely ideal cultural objects like artworks, which have a virtual body, and also to institutions and communities, which have a We-body (a "collective body") and a plural or social "personality," thus a "We-soul" (see Hua XXXIX: 181). To be sure, these results hold for normal, civilized adults in a life-worldly community, but the presence of a real individual, purely ideal or real plural corporeality is the basis for a sense-transfer that includes something like a soul. Thus, in Husserl's terms, a backward inquiry (*Rückfrage*) can be made in order to find out its phenomenological origins at the level of Cairns' primary automaticity.

---

[17] I wish to thank Professor Rudolf Bernet, Director of the Husserl Archives in Leuven, for his kind permission to quote from Husserl's unpublished manuscripts.

(4) Husserl also argues that the constitutive layer of *pure nature* is only an abstraction, precisely the part of experience that the natural scientist isolates in order to start his investigation in the naturalistic attitude. Our normal, everyday experience is rather that of the spiritual or cultural attitude, although its senses do not completely overlap with those of cultural science either. This means that for Husserl a pure nature devoid of all "soul"-character is an abstraction, and even one that obtains at a relatively late stage of historic development. So in a late manuscript dated 1934 he writes about "originary animism" and remarks that "man does not live his spiritual life in a spiritless world, in a world as matter, but he is spirit among spirits, among human and superhuman [spirits], and the universe is for him the whole of existing Life in the way of spirit, of I-being, of I-being among others as I-subjects, Life in the way of a universal I-community" (Hua XXIX: 3).[18] It is worth noting that there is a passage where he refers to a "mythical" surrounding world dominated by a "universal animism" which must be understood "pre-theoretically" (*vortheoretisch*) (Hua XV: 436). Another text adds that in this animistic-mythical world "There are no pure things in the sense of dead materials, and even the human and animal bodies of the dead are no longer yet mere physical things in our world, in the later sense of the de-deified world" (Hua XXIX: 44).[19] Incidentally, we may also add that in one place Husserl says that "the 'animistic' apprehension is *not* an invention or a construct of the natural man's fantasy, but his *experience*," and he adds that "only because it is his experience can it be refuted by other experiences […] as illusion" (Hua XLII: 206, italics mine).

(5) He further observes that a pure physical natural world with its lawfulness, its causality, is a mental construction emerging from a later stage, which one "ought not to project back onto the earlier" (Hua XXIX: 3). And in a lecture from 1919/1920 he gives credit to Comte's positivism in the sense that a teleological world-view has its psychological sources "in naive animismus," which we all know "from our early child-time," and he adds that "even the great thoughts have their child-time"; thus we find "the incipient Greek philosophy caught in hylozoism; being alive is simply classed as being, and this is nothing else but animism" (Hua Mat IX: 190).

10. *Conclusions*

As I said at the beginning, in this paper I have tried to sketch how Cairns' original reflections on *animism* may help understanding—and I think also overcoming in a way—the cultural gap between so-called "primitive" and so-called

---

[18] "Der ursprüngliche Animismus. Der Mensch lebt sein geistiges Leben nicht in einer geistlosen Welt, in einer Welt als Materie, sondern er ist Geist unter Geistern, unter menschlichen und übermenschlichen, und das Weltall ist für ihn das All der in der Weise des Geistes, des Ich-Seins, des Ich-Lebens unter anderen als Ich-Subjekte seienden Lebens, Leben in Form der universalen Ich-Gemeinschaft." All translations from Husserl's manuscripts are mine.
[19] "Es gibt keine puren Dinge als tote Sachen, und selbst die menschlichen und tierischen Leiber der Gestorbenen sind lange noch nicht bloße physische Dinge in unserem, in dem späteren Sinne der entgötterten Welt."

"civilized" societies. His considerations are remarkable in many ways. As a matter of conclusion, let me briefly reflect on a few ones.

1) To begin with, by adopting a revised form of Husserl's phenomenological method, Cairns is not collecting raw empirical data in order to formulate hypotheses but he is searching for invariant, i.e. a priori features of human experience. Anthropology and ethnology dig into the layers of active sense-giving and also of secondary passivity where sedimentation of experience and thus culture and cultural transmission take place. By means of his use of the *Abbau* method, Cairns is digging into a *deeper* layer, that of primary passivity or automaticity. It is located at the bottom of *all* cultural layers since it *grounds* them all, because it is the condition of possibility for any active and secondarily passive sense-formation and sense-transfer. His analyses are not carried out top-down but bottom-up, that is, he puts into brackets the scientific point of departure whereby animism is a property or condition of children and primitive cultures that must be described and traced back to their anthropological origins. In his inquiring back into the eidetic sources of animism, he finds out that from a genetic point of view, animistic sense-transfer is ultimately an essential feature of *every* conscious human being. Such a claim does in my opinion make it necessary to reconsider the Comtean view that animism is *just* a rudimentary attitude proper *solely* to underdeveloped stages of mankind, be those of children or "primitive" cultures. Indeed, for Cairns the animistic attitude "[…] differs from our habitual belief *only in extent*" (Embree 2012: 76, italics mine). Thus "every baby starts out as an animist" (Embree 2012: 78), and in the course of both personal and historical development this automatic universal sense-transfer undergoes modifications, acquires new meanings that partly cover or modify the older ones, but does not and cannot ever completely disappear. As we saw above, what actually happens is that the animistic world sinks into secondary automaticity. And in his answer to a question raised by Cairns with regard to the "different worlds" of primitive and civilized men, Husserl remarks that "Strictly speaking, it is absurd to speak of two or more actual worlds" (Cairns 1976: 63).

2) Not only the *origins* of animism but also the *survival* of animistic gestures in "normal," adult behaviour can be clarified this way. This may well explain why little children fear the darkness or talk with their toys, why "primitives" worship trees or the clap of thunder, and why normal, "civilized" adults are afraid of apparently senseless things or of the contents of their dreams. As Cairns points out with respect to the dead, dreaming is a major source of animistic beliefs. And animism proves to be inter-cultural in the sense that it precedes the distinction of peoples, races, and civilizations, because it occurs in every one, allowing at the same time for very dissimilar manners of presentation in the different human communities and times. If Cairns' claims are true, animism belongs ultimately to the universal features of the life-world—like space, time, causality, and the fact of living between the ground of the Earth and the openness of the Sky. In this sense, thus far from challenging Comte's view that animism or fetishism is a rudimentary attitude proper to underdeveloped stages of mankind, Cairns provides phenomenological evidence that it is a universally present attitude at fundamental levels of constitution. This in turn raises the question of why some people or cultures tend to remain more tightly

bound to this attitude while others tend to depart from it, that is, what are the phenomenological reasons for animism to sink into the background of secondary passivity.

3) Furthermore, is there not also a *reciprocal* influence of sense-transfer in animism? For this is what actually happens in our normal, adult relationship with Others. Not only do I transfer the sense of mine to the Other's body and thus constitute her as an *alter ego*, but it is also the Other who co-constitutes me insofar as she provides me with senses I cannot constitute solely by myself. A common, shared world comes to be common precisely in this way. In universal animism we have found a sense-transfer oriented e.g. from human to animal, thus animating the latter with a human-like soul, but a transfer in the opposite direction seems to be plausible, one in which animal features would be transferred to humans. This might be the back- or underground of more developed ideas like those of werewolves or vampires. Joseph Conrad's panther-woman, the Serpent of the Bible, or personifications in the legends of Old China, may be regarded as oral or literary stylizations of animistic apprehensions. If so, not only animals become human, but humans become animals in a kind of backwards-sense-transfer.

4) Finally, in normal, adult experience the core of present experience, what Husserl calls the *living present*, is heavily pervaded by secondary passivity, that is, by already habitualized noeses together with their sedimented noematic senses. Hyletic data or, in Cairns' critical terminology, *sensa*, are normally apprehended after those habitual noeses. Now in his late manuscripts on the genesis of consciousness Husserl also describes a "first hyle" that occurs within a mind which has not yet developed the polarity between Ego and the world. In the course of experience, out of this primal, confuse background, objectivities progressively emerge so that eventually a world of things comes to be constituted (see Hua XV: 604). This is also highlighted by Angela Ales Bello's fine remarks on the primitive mentality, for which hyletic experience or *sensa* prevails over noetic—active— perception or *sensing* of the world (see Ales Bello 2009, esp. Part I, Section 2, IV). She stresses the importance of primary sensations in the rites of primitive societies, but also in more complex religions like Christianity or Islam. As she points out, kinaestheses play a crucial role in this progressive differentiation of hyletic unities and thus of noematic pre-unities or "primal noemata." This can be documented by ritual dance, in which the role of the body is unquestionably great, since it is involved in the constitution not only of a surrounding Ego-centered space but chiefly of a surrounding social and significant We-space. Such communal space is in turn encircled by dark, partially empty horizons of the unknown, the mysterious and the evil. If this is true, then not only theism and pantheism are originated by automatic sense-transfer, but also religious experience at large would have its sources in this primary, obscure dimension of our being-in-the-world.

Luis Román Rabanaque
Universidad Católica Argentina / CONICET, Buenos Aires
Liverpool 2916–(1431) Buenos Aires, Argentina
rabanaque@yahoo.de

Works cited:

Hua IV = Husserl, Edmund. 1952. *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Zweites Buch: Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution*, ed. Marly Biemel. Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff.

Hua VI = Husserl, Edmund. 1954. *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie*, ed. Walter Biemel. Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff. Quoted after the English translation: *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970. The translation's page number follows the original one, separated by a slash.

Hua XV = Husserl. Edmund. 1973. *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität. Texte aus dem Nachlass. Dritter Teil: 1929–1935*, ed. Iso Kern. Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff.

Hua XXVII = Husserl. Edmund. 1989. *Aufsätze und Vorträge (1922–1937). Mit ergänzenden Texten*, ed. Thomas Nenon and Hans Rainer Sepp. Dordrecht/ Boston/ London: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Hua XXIX = Husserl, Edmund. 1993. *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie. Ergänzungsband. Texte aus dem Nachlass 1934–1937*, ed. Reinhold N. Smid. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Hua XXXIX = Husserl, Edmund. 2008. *Die Lebenswelt. Auslegungen der vorgegebenen Welt und ihrer Konstitution. Texte aus dem Nachlass (1916–1937)*, ed. Rochus Sowa. Dordrecht: Springer.

Hua XLII = Husserl, Edmund. 2013. *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie. Analysen des Unbewusstseins und der Instinkte. Metaphysik. Späte Ethik. Texte aus dem Nachlass (1908–1937)*, ed. Rochus Sowa and Thomas Vongehr. Dordrecht: Springer.

Hua Mat IX = Husserl, Edmund. 2012. *Einleitung in die Philosophie. Vorlesungen 1916–1920*, ed. Hanne Jakobs. (*Husserliana Materialien*, IX). Dordrecht: Springer.

Ales Bello, Angela. 2009. *The Divine in Husserl and Other Explorations*. (Analecta Husserliana 98). Dordrecht: Springer.

Cairns, Dorion. 1976. *Conversations with Husserl and Fink*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Cairns, Dorion. 2007. Some Applications of Husserl's Theory of Sense-Transfer. *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* 7: 309–335.

Cairns, Dorion. 2013. *The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Comte, Auguste. 1830. *Cours de philosophie positive*. Tome 1. Paris: Rouen Frères. English free and condensed translation: *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*. Trans. Harriet Martineau. London: J. Chapman, 1853.

Comte, Auguste. 1844. *Discours sur l'esprit positif*. Paris: Carilian-Goeury et Dalmont.

Embree, Lester. 2006. Aufbau to Animism: A sketch of the alternate methodology and major discovery in Dorion Cairns's revision of Edmund Husserl's "Fifth Cartesian Meditation". *Continental Philosophy Review* 39/1: 79–96.

Embree, Lester. 2012. *Animism, Adumbration, Willing, and Wisdom. Studies in the Phenomenology of Dorion Cairns*. Bucharest: Zeta Books.

Hart, James. 2009. *Who One Is*. Book I. Dordrecht: Springer.

Hocking, William Ernest. 1929. *Types of Philosophy*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Husserl, Edmund. 1964. *Erfahrung und Urteil. Untersuchungen zur Genealogie der Logik*. Hamburg: Claassen Verlag.

Lévy-Bruhl, Lucien. 1922. *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*. Paris: Alcan.

Schuhmann, Karl and Elizabeth. 1994. *Edmund Husserls Briefwechsel*. Dordrecht/London/Boston: Springer, vol. V.

Schuhmann, Karl. 1977. *Husserl-Chronik. Denk- und Lebensweg Edmund Husserls*. Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff.

Tylor, Edward Burnett. 1871. *Primitive Culture*. London: John Murray, 2 vols.

Willerslev, Rane. 2011. Frazer strikes back from the armchair. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.) 17: 504–526.