

The Weekly Newsmagazine of Science

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Cover: Personality can resemble a painting in the pointillist style. Look too closely and the image crumbles into unintelligible fragments. Two psychotherapists now have developed a controversial quantitative technique that they say can provide a clinically useful, detailed assessment of a person's character and behavior. Page 88 (Painting: Georges Pierre Seurat, "The Circus")

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Letters

Discussion comes to life

The last two paragraphs of the article "When stones come to life" (SN: 6/5/99, p. 360) suggest that those who battle forest fires might be perceiving life in the fires when they use terms like "devious" and "cunning." I would suggest that perhaps the author has lost sight of the fact that metaphor is an integral part of everyday life.

Bob Mauritsen Seattle, Wash.

The suggestion is that firefighters think of some fires as being alive, a process that certainly may in as yet unspecified ways relate to metaphor use. For more on this, see Philosophy in the Flesh, by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999, Basic Books). -B. Bower

I was intrigued by your article on animism, in particular this provocative and tantalizing incomplete statement: "Even scientists find it difficult not to assume that nonhuman animals, natural phenomena, and

theoretical entities operate on the basis of intentions and beliefs." As a linguist who has worked for 33 years with Native American languages, I have developed great respect for the diversity of expression of humans. I have also come to recognize that maligning the beliefs of the vast majority of the human race is tantamount to judging one's own forebears as ignorant and unworthy of respect. Given our vastly limited perspective, who are we to judge?

Jeff Leer Fairbanks, Alaska

In our Western culture, we seem to practice animism in several ways. We name ships, especially in the female gender. And we name hurricanes. I think most people in coastal areas assign a great many human qualities to named tropical storms, especially their unpredictability. These storms seem to come to life with their motion, power, shape, and "eye." Ships, like storms, can have the power of life and death over those who are closely involved with them.

Eric Adams Delray Beach, Fla.

It should surprise nobody that animism is popular among sophisticated adults in any culture, including our own. People (and presumably other critters) use animistic explanations because, under most real-world conditions, animism provides the best model available for predicting how the world will

respond to what people do.

A firefighter facing a blazing building, prairie, forest, or oil refinery has neither the time nor the means to develop a threedimensional finite model to predict the fire's future evolution. It's much more efficient to mentally model the fire as a hungry animal that can be stopped by depriving it of fuel to 'eat" and air to "breathe.'

Animism is the first resort for anyone trying to deal with a situation that is too complex or has too many unknowns to be modeled in a more "rational" way.

When the chips are down, sophisticated adults use the best mental approach available and really don't care whether theologians, psychologists, and philosophers approve of it or not.

> Charlie Masi Golden Valley, Ariz.

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