

For a Phytocentrism to Come

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The present essay formulates a phytocentric alternative to the biocentric and zoocentric critiques of anthropocentrism. Treating *phuton*—the Greek for “plant,” also meaning “growing being”—as a concrete entry point into the world of *phusis* (nature), I situate the intersecting trajectories and (cross-species, cross-kingdoms) communities of growth at the center of environmental theory and praxis. I explore the potential of phytocentrism for the “greening” of human consciousness brought back to its vegetal roots, as well as for tackling issues related, among others, to the use of biotechnologies and dietary ethics.

Fourth, He [Ohrmazd] created the Plant. At first it grew *in the middle of this earth*, several feet high, without branch or bark or thorn, moist and sweet. And it had in its essence the vital force of all plants. And to help the Plant, He created water and fire; . . . through their power it kept growing.

—*The Great Bundahishn*, 1a: 11

1. THE BIOCENTRIC PARADIGM

In a 1931 seminar on “Truth and Actuality,” drawing on his masterpiece *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele* [*Spirit as the Opponent of the Soul*], German philosopher and graphologist Ludwig Klages outlined the opposition between the “logocentric” and the “biocentric” approaches to the world. Logocentrism, a term Jacques Derrida later playfully transformed into *phallogocentrism* in his deconstruction of Western metaphysics, united the realist and the idealist strands of thought (Klages 2013, 57)¹ and subjugated actuality to the demands

1. For the most exhaustive English-language study of Klages to date, see Lebovic 2013.

of representation. Along with *logos*, this destructive attitude relied upon the notions of “will, deed . . . , mind, ‘idea’, ‘God’, ‘supreme being’, the pure subject, the absolute ego, and spirit” (49). And so, already in Klages, logocentrism was synonymous with the entire environmentally blind metaphysical tradition, to which the above keywords belonged and which postulated a power “de-souling the body and disembodying the soul” existing “outside the spatio-temporal universe.”² An alternative biocentric worldview was ensconced in *Lebensphilosophie*'s resistance to speculative metaphysics, the resistance that Martin Heidegger famously mocked as the product of a vitalist and biologist misreading of Nietzsche (Heidegger 1979, 23).³

Today, biocentrism is no longer “the exotic bloom of *Lebensphilosophie*” Heidegger made it out to be in his piecemeal critique of Klages (Heidegger 1979, 242). At the price of its anti-metaphysical provenance, it has lent its name to an ecological program, popularized largely thanks to the deep ecologist Arne Naess. “In the biocentric movement,” Naess writes, “we are biocentric or ecocentric. For us it is the ecosphere, the whole planet, Gaia, that is the basic unit, and every living being has an intrinsic value” (Naess 2005, 18). Biocentrism loses not only its historical but also its semantic specificity: *bios*, life, is now used interchangeably with *oikos*, house or dwelling, such that both Greek concepts are presumably situated at the center of two completely overlapping circles.⁴ There is nothing uncanny left in life, so long as we equalize living beings by recognizing, at least in principle (Sterba 1998), their mutually commensurate “intrinsic values.” Deep ecologists finally find themselves at home in life, mapped onto a homogeneous and non-striated axiological grid, permitting the soulless spirit of objectivity to slip into our thinking through the backdoor. Biocentric equality faithfully replicates the ideally equalizable—because quantified—relations among beings in the modern scientific paradigm. Most recently, the same leveling effects have been reintroduced into theoretical philosophy, notably by Graham Harman’s “object-oriented ontology,” where all relations exist on the same footing (Harman 2005, 75). It

2. “The Invader. The history of mankind shows that there occurs within man—and only within him—a war to the knife between the power of all-embracing love and a power from outside the spatio-temporal universe; this power severs the poles of life and destroys their unity by ‘de-souling’ the body and disembodying the soul: this power is spirit (*logos, pneuma, nous*)” (Klages 1965–1992, 390).

3. For more on Heidegger’s critique of Klages, refer to Bernasconi 2000 and Krell 1992.

4. “I use the term life in a broad sense common in everyday speech, and may therefore speak of landscapes and larger systems of the ecosphere as ‘living’—ultimately speaking of the life of the planet. The biospheric point of view . . . is not a narrower point of view than the ecospheric because *bios* is used in a broad sense” (Naess 2005, 618n4).

is not by chance that this latter philosophical movement heralds metaphysical revival for the twenty-first century!

What eludes deep ecologists and object-oriented ontologists alike is the affirmation of difference without resorting to its hierarchical arrangement on the scales of value and being. Within the logocentric scheme, differences in the world here-below are relative to the one extra-temporal source of their meaning. Regardless of the distinctions among them, all particular beings are equally insignificant in the face of “the supreme being,” for example. Deep ecologists achieve axiological parity by simply supplanting life, “the ecosphere, the whole planet, Gaia,” or whatever the case may be for the metaphysical avatars of old. Object-oriented ontologists do so in a still less original way, by reanimating the notion of objects as independent substances that precede relations and are therefore uniformly “withdrawn” (Bryant 2011, 26). On the side of the subject, who is now the maker of species-neutral ethical judgments or the *par inter pares* in the universe of objects, the only plausible attitude value equality may elicit is one of nihilistic indifference. While Paul Taylor contends that “the biocentric attitude underlies, supports, and makes intelligible the attitude of respect for nature,” (Taylor 2011, 167) such respect remains, at best, abstract. The singularity of its recipients is all but lost, as their qualitatively distinct forms of life evaporate into the ideality of nature, the ecosphere, or, indeed, *bios*. In its current shape, biocentrism recreates the very metaphysical totalities that have been responsible for the degradation, devaluation, and instrumentalization of the environment.

2. THE ZOOCENTRIC PARADIGM

If the shift from the human to the amorphous category of life construed as the new ontological and ethical center is fraught, then would emphasizing actual non-human living beings solve the conundrums of a resuscitated metaphysics? Or, is the project of re-centering *proper* to blame?

For Klages, biocentrism was an alluring antidote to the logocentric bias, with its subjection of life to the demands of immaterial spirit. But what if logocentrism were only a fraction of the traditional conception of the human, itself internally de-centered, misaligned, or spread along the theological, philosophical, and scientific axes? We might infer this de-centering from the work of Max Scheler, who, in *The Human Place in the Cosmos*, lists the three sources nourishing our idea of “human being,” *der Mensch*: 1) “the thought of the Jewish-Christian tradition about Adam and Eve, and of creation”; 2) the ancient Greek imputation of “*logos, phronesis, ratio, mens*—‘logos’ meaning here the possession of speech as well as the ability to grasp the ‘what’ of each and every entity”; and 3) the modern evolutionary and genetic perspective, in keeping with which the human “distinguishes himself only by degrees of

complexity of the energies and abilities that he has inherited from ancestors in the animal world" (5). That is to say, logocentrism is not equivalent to anthropocentrism because *logos* belongs exclusively to the second association with *anthropos*. Where there are three centers, there is none, which is why, taken on its own terms, *anthropocentrism* is already a fiction.

Still, the dividing lines between the second and the third senses of *der Mensch* in Scheler are more porous than they appear. Since Aristotle, *logos* has been at the core of *our animality*, which in Book I of *The Politics* doubly overwrites the human: "And why man is a political animal [*zōon politikon*] in a greater measure than any bee or any gregarious animal is clear. For nature, as we declare, does nothing without purpose; and man alone of the animals possesses speech [*zōon logon echon*]" (I, 1253a). The plurivocity of the Greek *logos*—which can signify, among other things, voice, speech, and reason—accommodates both the philosophical and the scientific poles of anthropocentrism. Despite its sheer materiality, voice nonetheless "pertains to the very generation of meaning" (Cavarero 2005, 182). To some extent, it works to re-center humans by simultaneously acknowledging and rejecting (technically speaking, disavowing) their animality.

However ambiguous the foundational role of *zōon* in the classical definition of the human, it indicates that anthropocentrism has traditionally relied on a heavy dose of zoocentrism for its self-enuciation. Although, from a metaphysical point of view, language, in line with the other senses of *logos*, is not merely superadded to our animality (Calarco 2008, 50), it requires the substratum of animal life, *zōē*, which appropriates it in and for the human. (It is the animal in us that "possesses speech.") The ongoing activity and the task of such appropriation might as well constitute the humanity of the human, spirited away, *ab initio*, by the animal. Metaphysical anthropology is, in effect, a kind of *zoo-logy*, articulating animal life and language in us.

In ethical theories, practices, and discourses, zoocentrism similarly shores up anthropocentrism, and vice versa. Understood as "the animal-centered, especially vertebrate-centered philosophy" (Vilkka 1997, 37), zoocentrism is preoccupied with animal welfare and protection, animal rights, and, at the extreme, advocates "abolitionism," a moral stance that sees any "uses of animals as a fundamental violation of their right not to be property" (Steiner 2009, xi). A more drastic separation of the human from the rest of the animal world is hardly imaginable, and yet the abolitionist stance insists on sentience as the moral baseline for decisions on whether or not a given animal has its proper interests and the corresponding "right not to be property."⁵ The point of zoocentrism—not the least in its abolitionist variation—is to show

5. "My definition of sentience as the consciousness of pain would distinguish sentient beings from beings that have nothing more than nociceptive neural reactions in whom

how sentient animals are similar to humans, in order to warrant the protection of the former. The *bios* of biocentrism was domesticated by virtue of its identification with ecocentrism; the *zōē* of zoocentrism is rendered familiar thanks to its reduction to the vitality of “higher animals,” i.e., vertebrates with a well-developed nervous system. These animals, like us, feel pain and suffer, are easily individuated, and have a familiar perceptual apparatus. The circle of *logos*, whose circumference used to demarcate the boundaries between a life that was killable and one that wasn’t (Haraway 2007, 80), dilates so as to shelter sentient creatures conscious of pain. Nevertheless, humans retain their status of a moral and ontological yardstick, even if they empathize with the pain of a calf about to be slaughtered in an abattoir. Zoocentrism continues to revolve around the human, orbiting this figure in more or less distant ellipses.

3. THE PHYTOCENTRIC PARADIGM, OR IS THERE A THIRD WAY?

As we have seen, biocentrism embraced life in its generality as the object of moral concern at the expense of the singular existences of plants, humans, animals, rivers, and mountains. Zoocentrism corrected this oversight, to the extent that it redirected its attention toward animals—and a highly specific cross-section of the animal kingdom at that. It has, however, lapsed into an ethical myopia when it came to our relation to nonsentient forms of life, not to mention the uncritical projection of human values onto a non-human world. Forced to pick between biocentrism and zoocentrism, we are, at bottom, facing the old choice between two ancient Greek concepts of life: *bios* on the one hand, *zōē* on the other. But the Greek conceptualization of life is itself culpable in a denial of vitality to certain living beings, such as plants. In *De Anima*, for instance, Aristotle deduces the phenomenon of vegetal life in a kind of *via negativa*, by diagnosing what remains of life after the subtraction of its patently animal manifestations of locomotion and perception: “[P]lants seem to live,” he writes, “without sharing [*metekhonta*] in locomotion or in perception” (410b, 23–24). The life of plants is thus a matter of appearance, for they only *seem to live* in the absence of the signature features of animal vitality. As Ronald Polansky appositely states in his commentary on this book of Aristotle, “that plants live still needs an argument” (2010, 174).

It is as though the life of plants slips between the cracks of *bios* and *zōē* when it is considered, at best, to be the deficient modality of animal existence. As a result of this vast green blind spot, there is yet to be a serious attempt at de-centering *anthropos* with reference to vegetal vitality and the capacities of

tissue damage may cause reflex actions but where there is no perception that it is the ‘self’ who is in pain” (Francione 2000, 190).

plants, or *phuta*. I have tentatively called such an attempt *phytocentrism*, to which the present essay contributes nothing more than a set of prolegomena.

Environmentally friendly ways of acting and thinking are often dubbed “green,” despite the fact that they do not question the human treatment of plants. Symptomatically, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* contains just two citations of “plantations” in its subject index, as opposed to countless subcategories allocated to the entry “animals, non-human” (Clark 2011, 244, 252). A major section of Greg Garrard’s *Ecocriticism* is devoted to animals (2011, 148–80), while there is no corresponding part of the book dedicated to plants. The neglect of vegetal life is especially detrimental to environmental thought because plants are perfectly suited for the function of mediators between the organic and the inorganic realms, between particularity and generality, between a singular form of life and vitality as such, and, perhaps, between the creaturely *zōē* and the collective or political *bios*. In what follows, I lay out the philosophical infrastructure for phytocentrism and discuss its key elements.

What (or who) is situated at the center of phytocentrism? And does the center still hold when it is occupied by *phuton*? The answer to the first question seems plain: a plant. But it is precisely this illusion of obviousness that needs to be dispelled. Returning to Aristotle’s *De Anima*, we discover a conceptual knot, where plants are entangled with growth and with nature as a whole. The common Greek word for plant, *phuton*, is etymologically linked to nature, *phusis*. Aristotle, in turn, intensifies this connection when he includes both plants and animals under the umbrella of *ta phuomena*, growing things. Putting the matter of vegetal life positively, he now argues that “all things that grow [*ta phuomena panta*]” are alive because they are capable of growing and decaying by themselves (413a, 24–26). Insofar as they too have these capacities, animals and humans are also growing things—hence the qualification *panta*, all. To concentrate our attention on plants is, by the same token, to disperse it to all other living beings. The most doubtful kind of life turns out to be the most universal.

The ineluctable vacillation between the particularity and the generality of growing things is, for me, the cornerstone of phytocentrism. *Ta phuomena* can denote plants or anything that grows: thanks to this indeterminacy, we neither limit our concern to one type of creatures, as it happens in zoo-centrism, nor reflect on the biosphere or the environment in the abstract, copying the model of biocentrism. Since animals clearly possess certain capacities plants do not have, animal life will not play the *legitimate* role of a synecdoche, where a part stands in for the whole. Admittedly, animals are often assumed to be the rightful representatives of life as such. But this synecdochic substitution is illegitimate, in that it excludes non-animal living beings, notably plants. Only growing beings are in a position to represent all

other creatures that, in addition to their respective modes of vitality, share vegetal life (Marder 2013).

So encompassing is the synecdoche of growth that it extends beyond actual living beings to nature as a whole. Polansky clarifies that *ta phuomena* is derived from the verb *phuo* (to grow), “which links with nature (*phusis*) and the usual word for plant (*phuton*)” (2010, 175). Phytocentrism is, inherently, a *phuo*-centrism and a *physio*-centrism—an orientation, through plants, toward growth and toward nature as a whole, conceived as the throng of creaturely growth. (Such an orientation, by the way, is not exclusive to organic beings alone, as mineral structures—and especially the ores—have been often conceived as gestating, embryo-like, within the maternal bodies of mountains.⁶) On Heidegger’s interpretation of this crucial term, *phusis* refers to “that which arises” (2001, 98–99), reminiscent of vegetal germination; it betokens “the event of standing forth, arising from the concealed” (2000, 16), alluding to a plant growing from its roots hidden in the earth; and it encompasses all of being as “what flourishes on its own, in no way compelled” (1979, 81). No one can grasp *phusis* directly without losing it in the abstractions of “nature,” “the biosphere,” or “the ecosphere.” A more oblique phytocentric approach skirts this problem, seeing that its protagonists—growing beings: the most faithful practitioners of the activity proper to *phusis*—are the singular images of the universal, the determinate-indeterminate points of entry into a world, which is overwhelmingly wider than that of plants.

Phytocentrism does not reconstitute a more authentic center of existence; to the contrary, it names the immanent implosion of this center, without being seduced by the fantasy of a purely fragmentary nature of existence. After all, the most rigid centralization happens when we least expect it, that is, when the center seems completely absent in the midst of the discontinuity of experience or life itself. Now, an immanent critique of a centralized totality is conceivable in light of the confusion that reigns between the totality’s core and its periphery, between what is presumably the most essential and the accidental. In the case of plants, such confusion reaches the highest pitch thanks to the synecdoche between a single natural entity—a plant—and all of nature. And the chief effect of placing this natural entity at the center of life is life’s ongoing and intrinsic de-centering.

Why is the substitution of a part for the whole, of a growing being for the ensemble of natural growth, so efficacious in the case of plants?—Because in the plant itself the relation between the parts and the whole is indeterminate. To appreciate the synecdochic logic of vegetal life, we must turn to the texts of Aristotle’s illustrious student, Theophrastus.

6. Cf. Eliade 1978, 43ff.

Besides describing, comparing, and classifying plants in a scientific investigation of unprecedented breadth (Pavord 2005, 41), the nine books that comprise Theophrastus's *Peri phuton historias* (*Enquiry into Plants*) contain invaluable, albeit little explored, philosophical insights on the permutations of the concept of "part," *meros*, in light of vegetal morphology. Theophrastus opens his enquiry by outlining the *aporiae* (translated by Arthur Hort as "difficulties") making it impossible to establish with any degree of certainty what essentially belongs to a plant, and what doesn't (I.i.1–2). Compared to an animal, the number of plant parts is "indeterminate [*aoristos*] and constantly changing" (I.i.2), "for a plant has the power of growth in all its parts, inasmuch as it has life in all its parts [*pantaché zōon*]" (I.i.4). Full of life, the parts of plants can become independent growing beings, upon their severance from the loose assemblage wherein they grow together. In other words, the exuberance of their life is such that, at any moment, they can constitute a new whole.

According to Aristotle, it is futile to imagine anything so excessive vis-à-vis all limits as a plant (*Physics* 187b), a judgment with which Theophrastus concurs: "In fact your plant is a thing various [*poikilon*: multicolored, as in a tapestry] and manifold, and so it is difficult to describe in general terms: in proof whereof we have the fact that we cannot here seize on any universal character which is common to all" (I.i.10). But, rather than being disheartened by the lack of a general definition, Theophrastus turns it into a guiding thread of his enquiry, exceptionally attuned to the singularity of each plant species. Just as, in any given plant, the number of parts is indeterminate and multiple, so "plant" as a concept is an astronomical sum of differences (*diaphora*).

The absence of vegetal universality throws a challenge to metaphysical philosophy, both modern and ancient, bent on setting knowledge and existence within exact epistemic and ontological limits. In contrast to his teacher's endeavor, Theophrastus suggests that we make our definitions not precise but typical, recognizing the "shared nature," *phuseōs koinon*, of trees, shrubs, under-shrubs, and herbs (I.iii.5–I.iii.6). We are yet to hear those reverberations of "shared nature" that would not invalidate the differences of plants but would merely outline similar trajectories of their growth (traced back to the verb *phuo*, *phuseōs koinon* can spell out "growing in common" or "growing together"). In the history of Western botany, Theophrastus's methodological directives have been received as sanctioning nominalism and systems of classification highlighting family resemblances among plants. Plant types have been determined based on the shape of a leaf, or, for instance, based on their modes of reproduction. But, whatever the criterion, the plants themselves and their *diaphora* have become secondary to the system, meant to account for the diversity of species on the grounds of a unitary—and quite arbitrary, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau complained (Cook 2012)—principle.

Perhaps, what I call “similar trajectories of growth” or “growing in common” catches sight of another semantic stratum of the text enunciated in a language that bound together plant, growth, and nature. Growth is the practical and conceptual hinge between the other two terms in the equation; it is the shared activity of plants, animals, and humans, as well as a marker of the plants’ differential, multiple, variegated type of being. After all, *phuta*, and even more so *ta phuomena*, are ample enough to involve the subjects of other-than-vegetal lives in the category of “growing beings.” Theophrastus reaffirms that “the kind of plants [*ton phuton genos*] is manifold” (I.ii.3), so much so, we might add, that it includes in its loose assemblage other growing beings that are not, strictly speaking, plants. The contemporary scientific designation for such communities of growth, welcoming various biological species or kingdoms, is “co-evolution.” Suffice it to mention here the example of male pollinators (e.g., wasps) that have co-evolved with certain flowers, such as the orchids, especially adapted to them, to the point of mimicking a receptive female. In communities that grow together across species boundaries, the indeterminacy characteristic of the relation between plant parts and wholes applies to the interactions among plants and to plant-animal communication. In the broadest sense, *phuseōs koinon* is the philosophical groundwork for the biochemical and microbiological study of “plant signaling and behavior.”

Capitalizing on the indeterminacy of vegetal life, phytocentrists bear in mind the whole biosphere by initially concentrating on its part, namely the flora. Analogous to growth, which articulates nature as a whole and plants, phytocentrism is the jointure of the singular and the universal, animated by the desire to promote vegetal, cross-species, and cross-kingdoms communities, to let them thrive on their own accord, and to affirm life throbbing in the shared trajectories of plant, animal, and human flourishing. The communities of growth at the center of phytocentrism (and any given plant is already such a community) combine the shared aspects of *bios* with the creaturely elements of *zōē*. They do not form a “network”—the preferred metaphor of biocentric interconnectedness, which flashes before our eyes an impoverished image of *phusis* apt for the Information Age. Nor do they lay claim to rights and interests—the default discourse of zoocentric activism, suitable for a Liberal mindset, which empathetically identifies with highly individualized living beings. Instead, our focus on the communities of growth should trigger a certain “greening of consciousness,” brought back to its vegetal roots.

4. THE GREENING OF CONSCIOUSNESS

In a fight against the nefarious legacy of anthropocentrism, the advantage of phytocentrism over the alternatives is in how it interferes with the all-absorbing projection of the *anthropos* onto the horizons of the world. The

insidiousness of anthropocentrism is due not so much to its conflation of human exceptionalism and human superiority (Boddice 2011, 7) as to the inflation of the human as the measure and standard for other forms of existence. Can we ever rid ourselves of this deep anthropocentric bias? After all, we perceive and reflect upon our surroundings from the zero-point of our sentient bodies, literally situated at the center of each individual world we both inhabit and construct. In lectures on nature, Maurice Merleau-Ponty crisply expresses this idea within the context of his phenomenology of the body: “the idea of a *Rechtgrund* is established in us, from which all knowledge will be formed. I could then displace the norms, but the idea of norm has been founded by my body. The Absolute in the relative is what my body brings to me” (2003, 75). Our living bodies themselves, of course, are far from being entirely human; aside from the vegetal capacity for growth that permeates them, they are home to hundreds of microbial cultures, cross-species genetic material, and so forth. We cannot help but anthropomorphize (and, in anthropomorphizing, normalize) even these aggregates we call “our bodies,” however. And, from the contrived center of existence, we act to transfigure and to disfigure every single being we encounter into a wanting reflection of ourselves.

In the uphill battle against anthropocentrism, it is thus necessary (1) to allow for the cross-species and cross-kingdoms relativity of experiences, values, or norms, and (2) to produce an estranging effect, whereby humans would no longer be able to recognize deficient versions of themselves in other kinds of creatures. Phytocentrism responds to both of these desiderata by valorizing the perspective of the plants themselves (as well as the values binding together all “growing beings”) and by short-circuiting the system of anthropocentric self-recognition. It carves out a niche between a biocentric dissolution of human difference in the environment and a zoocentric privileging of sentient existence, which does little by way of interfering with the dynamics of our recognition in the animal other. At the cognitive level, this carefully calibrated self-estrangement results in the “greening of consciousness.”

While human bodies are the composites of human and non-human matter, our consciousness is not entirely our own either. With our brain, we get “three-for-the-price-of-one”: a combination of reptilian, paleomammalian, and neomammalian complexes, the last of which is limited to the thinnest outer layer of the neocortex. As for consciousness, this catalogue does not do justice to a still more fundamental, “green,” or vegetal stratum.

The list of precursors to a phytocentric paradigm of thought includes, among others, Plotinus, Avicenna, and more recently, Scheler and Hans Jonas. In the *Enneads*, Plotinus theorizes the mind immanent in life, the One dispersed into different forms of vitality in growth, sensation, and abstract thought: “the other lives are thoughts in a way, but one is a growth-thought [*phutiké noesis*], one a sense-thought, and one a soul-thought. How, then, are

they thoughts? Because they are rational principles [*logoi*]. And every life is a thought, but one is dimmer than another” (III.8.8, 10–20). Growth-thought names the thinking of plants, since *phuton*, as we know, signifies both “plant” and “growth.” The Plotinian scope of respect for rational principles is therefore incomparably broader than that in Kantian philosophy: it spells out respect for the multifarious human and nonhuman forms of life that embody these principles.

Avicenna’s contributions to the greening of consciousness are the corollaries of the vegetal faculties, which he finds in the spheres of human perception and thinking. In *The Canon*, he likens the “natural forces” organized by the nutritive faculty, alongside the augmentative and generative faculties, to mental processes. To wit, the force of attraction is equivalent to perception; retention is memory; transformative power belongs to cogitation; the force of expulsion corresponds to expression; the augmentative faculty is translatable into the acquisition of knowledge; and the generative faculty is tied to inventiveness and creativity (Avicenna 1973, 112). Well in advance of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, physical processes and the tendencies of “the lowest” soul are interpreted as modes of thinking wholly under the sway of matter, unfiltered through the purifying machinations of (abstract) thought. By absorbing and retaining water and solar radiation, the plant “perceives” and “remembers” the liquid and sunlight; by growing, it acquires the “knowledge” of its environment, exploring the locale’s most beneficial, resource-rich niches; by reproducing itself, it invents, each time anew, its genus. . . . And, vice versa, humans “think” by way of eating, drinking, and expelling the byproducts of nourishing substances, by growing and by having children, though more rarified types of thought are available to them, as well.

In the philosophy of Scheler, vegetal processes epitomize the “lowest level of the psychic world.” The category, which Scheler deems appropriate to these processes, is *Drang*, or impulsion, “devoid of consciousness, sensation, and representation” (2009, 7). Specifically, the movements of growth toward light and away from other stimuli are “modes of impulsion,” while “[w]hat are called ‘drives’ in animals appear in plants only as a *general impulsion toward growth and reproduction*” (2009, 8). The comparison of vegetal *Drang* and animal *Trieb* (drive), also made in the writings of Henri Bergson, is telling, because it is more than a comparison: there is a sense that the drives are the modification of the exterior impulsion and, moreover, that thoughts are further alterations of the drive that has been wholly or partly interiorized or unreleased. Although Scheler refuses to group vegetal psychic processes together with consciousness, his argument implies that the latter is rooted in this “dark” region of intentional life.

The practice of the “greening of consciousness,” gleaned above, is both intellectual and ethical; it teases out the derivation of human identity from

a repressed phyto-logical source and, in doing so, urges us to acknowledge the invisible debt we owe to plant life. From a phytocentric standpoint, consciousness is not reducible to the powers of abstract representation but is coterminous with a material orientation of life to its goals that vary together with the temporalities and perspectives of the living. This is the case in Jonas's phenomenology of life, where the forward-looking, future-oriented trajectory of living is already evident at the cellular level of metabolism (Jonas 1966, 83ff).⁷ The metabolic milieu is never a neutral field of chemical and mechanical reactions but one imbued with subjective significance. Admittedly, the crypto-phytcentrism of this phenomenology has its limitations: similar to Scheler, who did not grant the possibility of consciousness to plants, Jonas dismisses the thesis that plants have a world, preferring the composite "plant-environment," which "consists of adjacent matter and impinging forces" (1966, 183). But despite this dismissal (and, again, like Scheler), he gestures toward a grounding of phenomenology, including that of time-consciousness, in the material conditions of life, notably in the nutritive faculty, which has been since Aristotle associated with plants. The greening of consciousness cannot proceed without a vegetalization of the phenomenological world.

5. TOWARD A PHYTOCENTRIC ETHICS

Neither these prolegomena nor phytocentrism itself are in the business of churning up determinate principles for ethical action. The stability and ordinary status of a principle are foreign to the philosophy of "growing beings." But this is not to say that there can be no ethics informed by the precepts of phytocentrism. Such an ethics would promote flourishing communities of growth, cross-species and cross-kingdoms. It would problematize not so much the biotechnological interference with the genetic make-up of plants, animals, and, increasingly, humans, but the biotechnologies' politico-economic framing that puts them squarely in the service of capital. In effect, the growth of capital is inversely proportional to the flourishing fostered by phytocentrism. Genetically modified crops are often robbed of their ownmost reproductive capacity, deprived of plasticity in fighting diseases, and denied an organic interaction with insects; sterilized and rendered sterile, they are, first, the pure means for the self-reproduction of capital and, second, the materials for bio-fuel or ingredients in a diet that increasingly looks like a refueling of animal and human organismic machines. In response to these trends, phytocentrism does not, nostalgically and naïvely, romanticize the labor-intensive agriculture of old, but rather insists that the wellbeing of plant, animal, and human species is of one piece, inseparable from the *how* of their growth.

7. See also Thompson 2010, 152–57.

A phytocentric dietary ethics would be inseparable from a more ethical agro-practice spurning the production and reproduction of vegetal life as a whole in the service of the reproduction of capital. Growth depends on metabolism—not only within plants, or within animal and human organisms, but also between species and biological kingdoms—and therefore on the active attribution of phenomenological significance to certain aspects of the lived environment. Labor is an example of such attribution or, as Marx once wrote, the metabolic exchange between humans and nature, their inorganic body. Phytocentrism is a trans-human, vegetally inflected, communism. More pertinently, plants are at the same time the objects of animal and human metabolic intentionality and intentional subjects in and of themselves. The dilemma that arises from this acknowledgment is parallel to the Kantian split between transcendental the empirical subjectivities. As autotelic growing beings, plants deserve to be respected; as unavoidable foodstuffs, they can be used for external purposes. A phytocentric dietary ethics will have to negotiate these polarities by ensuring that plants are not rendered completely instrumental for the satisfaction of our needs.

To the debates surrounding the ethics of human reproduction, phytocentrism contributes its unique approach to “life.” Given the diffuse nature of the communities of growth, where boundaries between a part and the whole are blurred, the “right to life” does not have as its locus an individual (or pre-individual) entity, such as the fetus. A phytocentric ethics of abortion would worry about the ecology of psychic, family, and social life, against the backdrop of clashing or mutually reinforcing trajectories of growth that a pregnancy would, in each case, entail. A de-anthropomorphic image of the human body, endorsed in phytocentrism, would also come into play both in relation to the fetus and its host. Instead of one (if only potential) individual within another, what we have here is an assemblage of growing beings as a ground, on which, with reference to Merleau-Ponty, the idea of norm is to be founded.

What gives me reason to believe that phytocentrism would succeed there where the other de-centering the human have failed? Lest we forget, the center of phytocentrism is internally de-centered, as it is occupied by *phuton*—a plant, a growing being, a miniature mirror of *phusis* itself. . . . In contrast to Blaise Pascal’s Nature, it is a circle, whose center is nowhere and the circumference everywhere. The plant itself lacks a vital center, equivalent to the heart or the brain of an animal; although in our imaginary the root stands for something like the irreplaceable and essential origin of things, the truth of the matter is that it is not the sole source of vegetal life. Left in water, twigs detached from the mother plant can develop rootlets of their own, exhibiting incredible tenacity and plasticity. Echoing Theophrastus in the first half of the nineteenth century, French botanist Charles Brisseau-Mirbel observed that, in plants, “each cell is a distinct utricle, and it seems that a truly organic connection is

never established between them. There are so many living individuals, each one enjoying the ability to increase, to multiply, to modify themselves within certain limits, working in common to the profit of the plant, whose constitutive materials they become; the plant is thus a collective being" (quoted in Canguilhem 2008, 41). The plant is immanently de-centered, and so are the philosophy and the ethics that put it in the limelight. A community of growth within wider communities of growth, it should provide us with a concrete model for political organization and cohabitation, thought and action. That is the promise of phytocentrism to come.

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