

# Dialogue

<http://journals.cambridge.org/DIA>

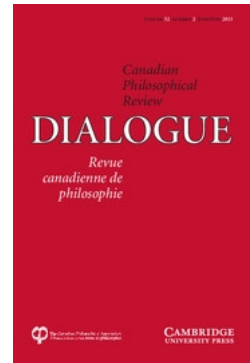
Additional services for **Dialogue**:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



---

## ***Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*** **MARDER MICHAEL** Columbia University Press, 2013. ix + 223 pp. \ \$29.50 (paper).

CATHERINE FULLARTON

Dialogue / *FirstView* Article / November 2013, pp 1 - 3

DOI: 10.1017/S0012217313001029, Published online: 13 November 2013

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0012217313001029](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0012217313001029)

### **How to cite this article:**

CATHERINE FULLARTON Review of Salzman Michele Renee 'The Making of a Christian Aristocracy: Social and Religious Change in the Western Roman Empire'  
Dialogue, Available on CJO 2013 doi:10.1017/S0012217313001029

**Request Permissions :** [Click here](#)

# Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

## *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*

MICHAEL MARDER

Columbia University Press, 2013. ix + 223 pp. \$29.50 (paper).

doi:10.1017/S0012217313001029

Michael Marder's book *Plant-Thinking* is a timely contribution to the project of expanding ethical considerations to non-human beings. Engaging hermeneutical phenomenology, deconstruction and weak thought, and philosophers from Aristotle to Levinas, Marder sketches a picture of plant-life that demands we reconsider the grounds on which we have hitherto excluded or justified ignoring vegetal beings from philosophical exploration. Rather than attempting to articulate something like an *experience* of planthood—a strategy he rightly acknowledges as misguided, at best, and pernicious, at worst—Marder focuses on tracing the discernable features of plant behaviour and the ways in which those overlap with features of our own existence to show how excluding them from consideration leads us to overlook fruitful avenues of thought, and insights into the nature of human existence.

In the first chapter—The Soul of the Plant—Marder retrieves the notion of the vegetative soul to draw our attention to the ways in which the ancient conception differs from the modern sense of vegetative as 'lifeless' or 'passive.' For the ancients, he describes, the vegetative soul was characterized by its capacity for motion—by its ability to grow, decay, and alter its state, though it cannot alter its position. On the other hand, it is also described as *deficient* relative to animal and human souls, and often characterized on the basis of this lacking. This provides a fruitful way in, for Marder, because it qualifies plant-life as bare life, survival: the force that remains after all other signs of animal life have been stripped away. This view nevertheless overlooks, according to Marder, the ways in which plant-life is excessively proliferate, and he speculates that our description of plants as deficient is perhaps a result of the fact that they overflow the bounds of our conceptual powers. Contra Nietzsche, who sees in this boundless expansion an expression of the will to power, Marder posits that the plant's growth is rather a sign of its unique openness to alterity; rather than returning to itself—since, indeed, it *lacks* a self—it remains directed at the other and preserves the other's difference.

In chapter 2—The Body of the Plant—Marder argues that traditional metaphysics has marginalized plants by refusing them its core values (of autonomy, individuality,

*Dialogue* (2013), Page 1 of 3.

© Canadian Philosophical Association/Association canadienne de philosophie 2013

## 2 Dialogue

meaning, etc.). He discusses the Platonic inversion of the plant's body—by which we have elevated and justified humans as upwardly 'rooted' in the world of Ideas, rather than in the ground—and proposes that we attempt to examine the world of plants from their own perspective so as to avoid the harms of metaphysical reduction. He draws our attention to particularities of plant anatomy—their maximization of superficiality over depth, their directedness towards their others, their lack of unity and centre, their ambiguous sexuality, etc.—and uses those to argue that plants make possible the kind of unconcealment Heidegger reserved for *Dasein* insofar as their very bodies are attuned to their others.

The third chapter—The Time of Plants—is devoted to exploring temporality in plant-life from the plant's own perspective (from the perspective of *ontophytology*, Marder writes). He argues that while plant-time has largely been conceived in terms of spatial expansion, or relative to a teleological relationship to ripening, these are merely human projections and don't belong properly to plant-experience. His argument is that, like *Dasein* for Heidegger, the meaning of vegetal life is time, and this is made evident through an examination of: (1) the heteronomy of seasonal changes; (2) the infinite character of plant growth, which persists despite interruptions; and (3) the cyclical character of their growth and reproduction. As in his explorations of plant-soul and the body of the plant, Marder argues that plant-time is characterized by its relation to alterity; since the plant lacks a unitary self, and since growth and reproductive capabilities are often discontinuous within the same organism, its time must be understood in its dependent relationship with its environment.

In the penultimate chapter, Marder discusses the freedom of plants. He begins by exploring what has been said about plants' shapes (as torpid) and their lack of *telos*. He argues that plants' indifference, lack of selfhood, and related lack of concern for their own self-preservation makes them capable of at least one kind of freedom: the free and unconcerned engagement of play. In the last section of the chapter, he links plant emancipation with our own, and argues that the two are intimately related.

The final chapter—The Wisdom of Plants—is perhaps where Marder's text is clearest; there he argues that the de-centering of humans, consistent with the destruction of metaphysics, necessitates that we likewise reject anthropomorphic conceptions of truth and knowledge. Accordingly, he attempts to articulate a "non-conscious intentionality" (153) of plants that links thinking to memory and vitality rather than self-consciousness and rationality. Engaging Bergson, Bateson, Deleuze and Guattari, Levinas, Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty (among others), Marder argues that plant-thinking frees us to appreciate the rich diversity of perspectives possible when thought is understood as a creative and inventive "thinking before thinking" (154)—thought more primal than an attempt to assimilate and 'digest' information.

Marder expertly weaves together diverse philosophical narratives, but could do more to make those ideas accessible to readers (from whom he seems to assume a very high level of proficiency), since he often provides little explanation to contextualize his use of terms. Likewise, his project could only be improved by the addition of more empirical information about plant-life; while he occasionally alludes to recent research in plant studies, his claims about the nature of vegetal life need more concrete tethers for clarity and persuasiveness. Along the same lines, the organization of the text is also, at times, confusing. The same philosophical concepts are raised in the context of different claims about plant-life and it's not always clear how subsequent discussions build on previous insights or point them in a new direction. Nevertheless, this is a strong contribution to

the post-metaphysical project, highlighting important facets of our indebtedness and relatedness to plant-life, and we are likewise indebted to Marder for gathering such a wealth of resources for re-thinking vegetal life.

CATHERINE FULLARTON *Independent Scholar*