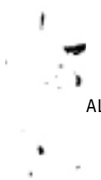
*We talked to the professor about his own personal relation to the plant world and about the basis of plant-philosophy.*



ALJAŽ ŠKRLEP in conversation with
MICHAEL MARDER, a research professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of the Basque Country and an author of many articles and book dedicated to philosophy of vegetal life, is one of the main authors who has in recent years pronounced plants as a subject worthy of rigorous philosophical contemplation. Two of his most important works on the topic are *Plant-Thinking* (Columbia University Press, 2013) and *The Philosopher's Plant* (Columbia University Press, 2014), while an Italian translation of his book *The Chernobyl Herbarium* (Open Humanities Press, 2016) will be published later this year at Mimesis Edizioni.

AŠ First of all, you've dealt deeply – and still do – with thinkers such as Heidegger, Derrida, Schmitt, Adorno and so one. How does one dealing with all those authors get into philosophy of plants and of vegetal life?

MM Well, it was already some time ago when I got interested in this question. I came to it through a singular combination of events. On the one hand, I was reading Aristotle and a wonderful book on Aristotle's ethics by an Italian philosopher Claudia Baracchi. As I was reading both Aristotle this important treatise on his thought, I realized that the most basic, most fundamental stratum of the soul is actually vegetal. It's not the animal soul, which is what we usually think of when we refer to the non-human origins of the human. In fact, for Aristotle, it is the vegetal or the vegetative soul (what he calls *tó threptikon*) that is the shared basis of all life. At that time, there was a very strong turn toward critical animal studies in the humanities and an attempt to highlight the importance of animality for the constitution of the human, but I wondered whether or not this move was radical enough. All of a sudden, it seemed not to go deep enough, precisely to the roots of subjectivity, or the soul, that ever since Aristotle has included plants. And, at the same time, I found myself in a beautiful wooded setting of northern Portugal, a national park straddling the northern border between Portugal and Spain, called Gerês. It looks and feels like an enchanted forest with moss-covered trees, and there are some wild horses living there, as well. And so, during the day I would take very long walks in this forest and then at night by the fireplace I would read Aristotle and Baracchi's masterful commentary on his thought. I think it's the combination of these two processes that led to my abiding interest in the question of vegetal philosophy.

AŠ When Heidegger said that a human is world-forming, animal is poor in world and stones are worldless, he did not determine the status of the world of plants, even though he speaks of them, even putting them, it seems, closer to animals than to material things like stones. Even Derrida explicitly said that Heidegger did mention plants, but never elaborated on the matter. The interesting thing is that Derrida also said that the question of the plant is of big importance and that we have to stick with it – but he never really did. Why do you think there was – and partially still is – this hesitation to determine the philosophical status of the plant? And how did we get to this point that some people today are determining this status right now as we speak?

MM There are several reasons for this, and I'll highlight just two of the most salient ones. The first reason is that plant life does not fit any of the clearly defined modes of vitality in Western thought. Plants are weird beings who seem to be neither alive nor dead, or both alive and dead at the same time, based on the Western definitions of vitality. So, for the most part, philosophers did not quite know what to do with plants, how to categorize them, precisely because they do not fit into one clear category of beings, but straddle various divides. And the other reason is maybe a little deeper and more ontological or metaphysical, I would say. Ever since Plato, philosophy has defined true being as that which is immutable, that which is not generated, not prone to change or decay. These are all features of Plato's ideas, but they're also the features of Aristotle's unmoved mover, of God in medieval philosophy, of substance and so on. Together with Heidegger and Derrida, we could give a whole list of metaphysical concepts that replicate these characteristics. But, at the same time, plants again do not fit the ideal of metaphysical being. If anything, they're the exact opposite of this ideal. Plants are defined by their capacity to grow, to decay, to change shape or metamorphose. It follows that, even without realizing it – and this has been my thesis ever since *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013) –, the project of metaphysical philosophy is formulated against vegetal being, against a being that is not at all distinguishable from becoming: that which is mutable, constantly generating itself, regenerating, decaying, and so forth. I could even say that vegetality is the constitutive outside of metaphysics; it is that which allows the metaphysical project to consolidate and define itself over and against vegetal life, which is at the same time repressed in much of metaphysical thought. This foundational gesture of metaphysical philosophy is itself forgotten, immediately erased from the construction of the metaphysical edifice. But, at the same time, it is what allows metaphysics to come into its own and to define itself as a coherent project.

AŠ Which are then the biggest misconceptions that people in general have about plants? Do they coincide with those of philosophy?

MM The metaphysical ideas that I'm talking about have been over centuries and millennia ingrained in our common ways of thinking and seeing the world. What we would call, generally, "ideologies" are woven out of metaphysical ideas that have been digested into the cultural fabric and milieu. Clearly, there are a number of prevalent biases about plants, the most dominant of which are that plants are very simple forms of life, that they are simpler than either animals or humans in terms of their physiology, their anatomical features, their genetics. The other misconception is that plants are very boring: there is nothing exciting going on in the vegetal world, because flora seems to be immobile. It seems that plants are just rooted in place; they're stuck there and nothing seems to be happening. What we don't realize is that plants are moving on a different time scale inaccessible to our perceptual apparatus unaided by various tools, like the technology of time-lapse photography, for instance. So, because they are so simple, boring and immobile, they are supposed to be uninteresting. There is nothing to be learned about them, they are not going to change anything in our view of the world or of ourselves… What we get here is a strange mix of an illusion of absolute familiarity and an absolute strangeness and alienation, the inability to recognize oneself in a plant and a plant in oneself.

AŠ I wanted to talk a little bit about plant-thinking. In your research about it, which is the most fundamental or minimal condition that you've found which could characterize an activity as thinking? And how does that sort of understanding of thinking deviate from our typical understanding of it?

MM Even though I have collaborated quite a bit with plant scientists who are working on the question of plant intelligence and I'm very sympathetic to their work, I want to draw a very clear line of demarcation between intelligence and thinking. Intelligence is basically, to my mind, a problem-solving activity. It is always achievement-oriented, as there are clear objectives that need to be achieved with it as a tool. One can identify intelligence at the level of a single living being, of collectives, and all the way to the evolutionary level where the basic problems of life itself have to be resolved through these means. When it comes to thinking, what I mean is something closer to Ancient Greek philosophy and specifically to the presocratic Parmenides and the neoplatonic thinker Plotinus. For Parmenides, thinking and being are one; he says literally in one of his fragments: *It is the same thing for thinking and for being* [τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστίν τε καὶ εἶναι]. Which means that "it is the same thing" for plant-thinking and for plant-being. This line of thought was then pursued by Plotinus, whom I've just mentioned and who contended that the whole of the universe, the whole reality is One. It's like a gigantic tree that is ramified into different modes of existence, expressed in corresponding modes of thinking. So, when the One thinks itself into planthood, we get plant-thinking. When the One thinks itself into animality, we get animal-thinking. The same goes for humanity. Different modes of thought are appropriate for different modes of being.

In a sense, I do not accept Plotinus's circumscription of the thinking of plants to what he calls the dimmest kind of thinking that is only oriented toward how to obtain nourishment and reproduce. He adopts this insight from the Aristotelian notion of the vegetal soul. Rather, plant-thinking as the expression of vegetal being includes, once again, much more complex phenomena, such as decision-making and time- and place-consciousness, relations, cross-species and cross-kingdoms assemblages of plants and not plants (say, microbes, fungi and other microorganisms that gather around plant roots). This capacity for physical expression and assemblage (of one's one's own corporeal extension and that of others) is thinking.

When it comes to questions of plant intelligence proper, I'm very much a proponent of the view that plants are intelligent beings. The idea is that plants not only have memory at various levels, from the cellular to the evolutionary, but that they are attentive beings, they perceive

– perhaps, much more than we, humans, perceive with our limited abilities and perceptual apparatus. But since I'm trained as a phenomenologist, I adopt a phenomenological framework to the question of plant intelligence. I consider, for instance, ways in which plants are intentional beings. Their growth is not random, both above and below ground-level. Plants grow toward certain things that they need to achieve or to obtain and away from obstacles, potential conflicts over resources, and so on. The notion of intentionality in phenomenology is obviously a central one. It is not just an intention in the sense of wanting something, wanting to obtain something, but, for Edmund Husserl, intentionality is the very structure of consciousness. To think about consciousness is to think about directedness-toward, according to Husserl. When we're conscious of something, we're directed toward that thing of which we're conscious. It can be an object in the outside world, or it can be a remembered object or an anticipated object. Whatever it is, our consciousness is a vector striving toward that which we intend. And with plants I have found that this notion of intentionality in its broadest sense imaginable works perfectly and works *extensionally*. Plants, when they intend something, grow-towards… in a sort of physicalization of consciousness and spatialization of intentionality, which is typically interiorized and invisible in human life.

AŠ Speaking about intentionality: in your books you use Hegel's concept of bad infinity to characterize intentions of the plant. Can you elaborate on that?

MM Hegel sees in plant growth a kind of concretization of bad infinity, which is the infinity of a straight line that does not have any closure. Let's recall that, for Hegel, there are two kinds of infinity: in addition to bad infinity, there is the good infinity of the circle that is closed in itself. This has been the figure of perfection for philosophers since Plato and Aristotle. As plants grow, what are they moving toward in an open-ended fashion? They are moving (growing more branches, unfurling more leaves…) towards solar energy, something that is both a resource and not a resource, something that cannot be appropriated, possessed and contained once and for all. In its excessiveness, the sun is what gives life. Plants in their seemingly uncontrolled, untameable growth are trying to be adequate to something that is excessive in and of itself, to solar energy, which, from Plato to Georges Bataille, is not only inexhaustible but an excess that is generative of something, in fact of everything living. Instead of focusing on this particular feature of plant growth as bad infinity, I mobilize the work of Emmanuel Levinas who sees infinity in the ethical relation between the I and the other precisely along these lines. The more I do for the other, the more still needs to be done for her. The distance between the I and the other is never going to be bridged; no matter how much I move toward the other, that otherness is unattainable. It is in place of these rather abstract notions I put plants and the sun. And then we get not only the extensionality of intentional consciousness but also of the ethical relation in this never-enough of plant growth.

AŠ The main topic of this edition of the Robida magazine is the forest. Do you think that we should use different strategies as philosophers when talking about a plant or a forest? Maybe an encounter with the forest is somehow different from the encounter with a plant. People tend to speak of this encounter with the forest in terms of the other. There is something impenetrable in a forest itself. You wrote about a plant as a non-object, maybe the forest is even more of a non-object. What path would you take thinking about it?

MM I adopt the strategy of a certain intellectual archaeology going back to some of the first philosophical attempts to approximate the forest in thinking. Those attempts were undertaken by Aristotle, once again. Aristotle gave us a whole vocabulary of philosophy, very often by taking common Greek words and recoding them, giving them specialized significance. One of those words was the Greek word *hyle*, which meant two things at the same time. It meant the woods, a living forest, but also wood, that is lumber, dead trees that are ready for processing as furniture etc. This word with its already ambiguous signification, vacillating between the living woods and dead wood, became the word for matter. The concept that we know in its Latin transcription as *materia*, is a translation of the Greek *hyle*, which clearly has vegetal underpinning and which, like all approaches to plants, is indeterminate, vacillating between the regions of life and death. The forest in that sense, with its darkness, impenetrability, otherness, is the figuration of matter. And not only the figuration, but the very source of the thinking of matter, even though the possibility that trees growing in the forest might be converted into lumber, dead wood, is already included in the philosophical concept itself, just as it is included in the Greek word from which this concept originated. This is the starting point that I take in relation to the forest. But, of course, there has already been important philosophical work done on forests, specifically in the 20th century. I'm thinking, needless to say, of Martin Heidegger. When he talks about the clearing in being and human existence as being in the clearing, he supposes that this clearing is in the forest. Matter is dense and dark and impenetrable, but not completely so. Once there is an opening in it, that is where existence – at least of the human kind – starts to flourish. Heidegger tries to find balance between the absolute density of matter and something of spirit that is shining in it, that is emerging through it immanently without being imposed from above. Then, the other work that I would like to highlight in this respect is by Heidegger's Russian translator Vladimir Bibikhin, who was an important philosopher in his own right and who gave in the early '90s a yearlong university seminar in Moscow on the woods, the need to think about matter according to this vegetal term and the permutations of the biology of matter from Aristotle to contemporary science.

AŠ People reading your books can see your ideas also as a start for a political project. I'm talking of course about your concept of vegetal democracy. How would you define the term? What can we learn from plants about our dealing with politics and can we say that society will have to be more of a vegetal society if it wants to keep existing?

MM In the first place, when we talk about politics, it is once again animality that comes to mind, not least because Aristotle defined the human as a political animal. Even if we think of protest movements, for instance we imagine demonstrations, masses of people moving through the streets, roaming the streets as packs of animals would. But the moment we start questioning the very notion of movement, both political movements and movement as a physical activity, strange things start happening, because locomotion, moving from place to place, is only one kind of movement—you guessed it!—for Aristotle. Besides locomotion, he also recognises three other kinds of movement, which are growth, decay and metamorphosis. Which means that plants participate in three out of four significations of movement. One of senses of vegetal politics depends on recodifying the notion of political movement, that would be more consistent with movements of plants and not necessarily with the human and animal locomotion. This is what I tried to do in a very preliminary way in my reflections on the Occupy movement about ten years ago, when it was at its height. Because, to my mind, the Occupy movement gave us a model of a much more vegetal-based politics than an animal one, precisely because people did not pass through the streets. Instead, they planted themselves in different sites around the world and the whole protest had to do with staying there, with remaining, almost rooting oneself in a place. As a global movement, it also grew not as an animal organism would, with a very clearly defined plan, but in a very anarchic fashion, whereby in certain parts of the world the Occupy movement was already withering, while in others it was flaring up. It really obeyed the dynamics of vegetal life and death, where the two are not in contradiction to one another but actually happen simultaneously.

But, at the same time, instead of positing vegetal political reality as an ideal, what I would suggest is that our social, political and, above all, technological reality is already vegetal. Our thinking has not yet caught up with that vegetal transformation of our reality. The very notion of the web as a metaphor for being itself is already veering toward vegetality, because it does not have a single command-and-control centre. It has nodes, at which new links might emerge or which might remain dormant, a little bit like the meristem parts of plants, where new growth might happen, given optimal environmental conditions from the outside. Or it might not. So, I think that our task is not to come up with ideal

models, but, rather, to think about the present in the present and to realize that our political, social, technological reality is already vegetal and yet we're still operating with nineteenth-century concepts of the state as a gigantic animal-like organism. In the sense, the future is already here; we just haven't noticed its advent. And that future is vegetal.