

sing for a king. Here Martin gives them the last word, a terrifying one: “Boys, the afterlife will be a pie of live bird heads. / Their song so cracked you won’t dare take a bite.” —Megan Pugh



Consider the cabbage

In the summer of 1914, the polymath scientist Jagadis C. Bose, attempting to prove that plants feel pain and emotional distress, invited leading literary and scientific figures to visit his private laboratories for demonstrations of plant sentience. According to Bose’s biographer, George Bernard Shaw attended one of these events, and, “being a vegetarian, was unhappy to find that a piece of cabbage was thrown into violent convulsion when scalded to death.” A hundred years later, we are again being asked by academics to consider the cabbage as well as the lobster. A recent explosion of scientific literature about plant perception and communication has shown that, among other things, plants can interpret sounds and use chemical signaling to warn other plants about nearby predators. These studies suggest that it may be time to reevaluate our basic conceptions about the status of vegetal life.

The idea of plant sentience can be unsettling. Plants seem so alien to us, so passive, so unknowably silent, and above all so lacking in the qualities we associate with mentality, that understanding them to be intelligent forces us to question our longest-held assumptions about what constitutes consciousness. This is not a new philosophical impasse, however: early in his book *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*, Matthew Hall introduces Theophrastus, a classical Greek thinker. Aristotle, Theophrastus’s mentor, believed that plants had merely a “nutritive soul” and were capable of nothing of a higher order than self-preservation. Theophrastus, on the other hand, believed plants were volitional and autonomous, a belief he

delineated in two long books (*Enquiry into Plants* and *On the Causes of Plants*), which equal Aristotle’s works in argumentation and obsessive classification. Hall, a research scientist at the Centre for Middle Eastern Plants at Edinburgh’s Royal Botanic Garden, invokes Theophrastus to show that our traditional understanding of plants as merely passive resources, as literal background for the “real” lives of animals and humans, is far from a fixed, “natural” position.

Theophrastus’s intuitions are now proving more accurate than historians of science might have imagined even a few decades ago. Moved by recent findings about plant sentience, humanists and social scientists have been reconsidering subjectivity and life itself, and have been quick to produce exploratory texts: recent anthologies and monographs have included critical readings of the representation of plants in English literature and ethnographies of human-plant interactions by radical anthropologists (like *The Multispecies Salon* and Eduardo Kohn’s *How Forests Think*).

The question of why we think about plants the way we do and the problem of how little scholarly attention has been paid to plant intelligence have both practical and theoretical significance, and two books already canonical in human-plant studies are specifically concerned with the treatment of plants in the history of philosophy. On the more pragmatic end, Hall’s *Plants as Persons* offers an ethical, activist position: our understanding of plants as beings alters how we behave toward them and ultimately how we treat the planet, whose survival depends on the flourishing of its plantscapes. Hall’s claim is that our conceptions of personhood, and its attendant rights and morals, ought to be extended to include plants; he supports this idea through arguments similar to those made in the early animal-rights movement (most notably in Peter Singer’s 1975 *Animal Liberation*). His broad, sweeping history points out those places and times when we have viewed plants as autonomous, relational, self-governing organisms, capable both of happiness and of being harmed. These models of proto-personhood are found in Theophrastus, as well as in Jain philosophy, East Asian Buddhism, and much of indigenous and pagan thought—all of which Hall contrasts with Western “zoocentric” ideas about vegetal life.

In *The Philosopher’s Plant: An Intellectual*

Herbarium, philosopher Michael Marder, whose work has also been extremely influential in this nascent field, takes a more speculative tack. Hall falls short, according to Marder, in his reliance on existing concepts of personhood. Marder urges us to move past trying to imagine plants as “like us,” encouraging us instead to encounter them as they are in the world. This un-thinking would require us to dig past our inherited understanding of what constitutes life, and what it means to experience time, freedom, intention, and death. While both Marder and Hall deemphasize anthropocentrism, Marder wants to use the complexities of plant life to critique Western philosophy itself, not to bring plants into its fold.

Yet plants have played a part in Western philosophy since its early days. Marder lays out a concise history of Western metaphysics, using one plant per chapter to typify, critique, or otherwise trouble the thinking of an important philosopher: Aristotle’s wheat, Kant’s tulip. The result is an idiosyncratic view of the edges (and often the underpinnings) of some of the loftiest human thought, and a revelation of just how much philosophers have relied on the quiet lives of plants to explain their concepts, often without considering the ontology of the plants themselves.

Marder concludes *The Philosopher’s Plant* by introducing the philosopher Luce Irigaray, whose work on women’s being and writing suggests the breadth enabled by thinking outside inherited modes. Irigaray and Marder are currently working on an experimental “plant autobiography,” suggesting that at least one outcome of critical plant studies might be new genres of life writing. It remains to be seen how much a full understanding of vegetal being can do to bolster environmental ethics or push the boundaries of philosophical thought, but the blossoming field does offer a response to some major questions that the humanities and social sciences currently face: what sorts of inquiry will occupy the future landscapes of academic work? What other silent presences have we been overlooking in the long history of our respective disciplines? Most of all, what does it mean to be a living being, with volition and agency, however limited? The answer is crucial for understanding not just plants but also new kinds of life, post-human and otherwise, that have yet to come into being. —Monica Westin