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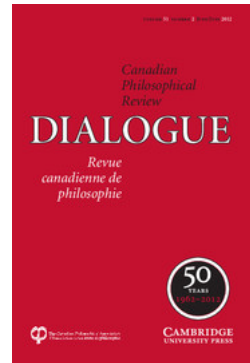
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# The Life of Plants and the Limits of Empathy

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*ABSTRACT: This article examines the possibility of an ethical treatment of plants grounded in empathy. Upon considering whether an empathetic approach to vegetal life is compatible with the crucial features of plant ontology, it is concluded that the feeling of empathy with plants disregards their mode of being and projects the constructs and expectations of the human empathizer onto the object of empathy. Vegetal life, thus, reveals the limits of empathy, as well as its anthropocentric and potentially unethical underpinnings.*

*RÉSUMÉ : Cet article analyse la possibilité d'un traitement éthique des plantes basé sur l'empathie. Après avoir examiné la compatibilité de l'approche empathique à la vie végétale avec les caractéristiques essentielles de l'ontologie des plantes, il est conclu que le sentiment d'empathie à l'égard des plantes ne tient pas compte de leur mode d'être. Au contraire, ce sentiment projette les conceptions et les attentes de l'empathiseur humain sur l'objet de l'empathie. La vie végétale révèle donc les limites de l'empathie, ainsi que ses fondements anthropocentriques et potentiellement antiéthiques.*

*Denn wir sind wie Baumstämme im Schnee. Scheinbar liegen sie glatt auf, und mit kleinem Anstoß sollte man sie wegschieben können. Nein, das kann man nicht, denn sie sind fest mit dem Boden verbunden. Aber sieh, sogar das ist nur scheinbar.*

Franz Kafka, "Die Bäume"<sup>1</sup>

Consider the birch and oak trees being cut down in the Khimki forest, just to the North of Moscow, as a part of the government's plan to connect the capital of Russia to St. Petersburg by means of a new highway, slated to pass right in

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the middle of the massive wooded area. The buzzing of chainsaws and the infernal noise of heavy “tree removal” equipment join in an uncanny, deafening choir with the cracking of the felled birches and oaks that have given in to the unforgiving metal. What do human observers feel at the sight (and sound) of the unfolding destruction? Much depends on the perspective, of course. Municipal and federal state officials experience a sense of satisfaction with the exercise of their unlimited power to convert, at a great financial gain, the entire forest into a network of highways, hotels, and housing units. Law enforcement officers appear not to feel anything, save for their blind rage at the protesters opposed to this environmental crime. But what about the concerned members of the civil society, the activists, who have been camping in Khimki and in front of the Russian Parliament around the clock and who have attempted to defend the forest with their bodies in the face of disproportional, state-sanctioned violence and the overwhelming chances of defeat? The rationale for their intense commitment is a microcosm of the broader debate surrounding the motivations behind ethical concerns with the environment. The forest on the verge of disappearance is deemed to be a part of the legacy bequeathed to future generations, an indispensable natural “purifier” of the already dangerously polluted Moscow air, an intrinsic value incommensurate with any economic calculations and benefits from the projected highway...

Putting the diverse rational explanations to one side, is it possible that, emotionally, the opponents of deforestation in Khimki and elsewhere sense a certain empathy with the felled trees, vicariously identifying with the fate of the uprooted plants, as the narrator in Kafka’s “The Trees” seems to do? And if empirically this is the case, does the empathetic relation of human beings to plants, not to speak of animals, hold the potential for grounding environmental ethics the way it has recently shored up the relational ethics of care?<sup>2</sup>

While it is conceivable that someone could empathize with the plants themselves, philosophical accounts of this possibility disregard the uniqueness of vegetal beings and treat them as representatives of something larger than themselves, namely Life. Empathy presupposes this elemental commonality, the substantial sameness of the empathizer and the empathized with, united by the fact that both are living beings. The commonality or, indeed, the community of the living would then furnish the desired foundation for the ethical comportment. In what follows, however, I argue that plants and their peculiar ontology should be interpreted as embodied limits to empathy and as points of resistance to a totalizing vitalism. As such, they pose a series of barriers to the humanistic, anthropocentric, and narcissistic ethics predicated on the underlying sameness of the ethical actor and the object of his or her action. That is not to say that the being of plants necessarily undermines the ethics of empathy in general, nor is it to conclude that an alternative (non-empathetic, or non-emotional, *and* non-rational) ethical approach to vegetal life is unfathomable. An ethics oriented toward and arising from plants would preclude human self-recognition

in and projection onto the world of the flora, or, more positively, would entail an affirmation of the irreducible difference between this world and that of human beings.

### **Plant Ontology as a Barrier to Empathy**

Moral philosophers tend to draw conceptual lines of demarcation between compassion, pity, and empathy.<sup>3</sup> Compassion, as both the Latin origin of the English term and the German *Mitleiden* indicate, entails a sense of togetherness in *pathos* or suffering. Although the deepest etymological stratum of meaning is irrevocably lost in most contemporary discussions, as in Martha Nussbaum's definition of compassion as "a painful emotion occasioned by another person's undeserved misfortune,"<sup>4</sup> nineteenth-century thinkers, most notably Schopenhauer, underscore the burgeoning community that comes together through the experience of suffering-with.<sup>5</sup> The scope of compassion at its most profound is not narrowed down to other human beings but potentially embraces all suffering creatures, so that the "basis of morality is not any kind of abstract concept nor a rational conception of duty, but rather the *felt* connection we have with all living beings capable of suffering."<sup>6</sup> The "*felt* connection" forged in this sentiment, albeit less anthropocentric than the ties binding us exclusively to other persons, inevitably leaves out those beings, like plants, we deem incapable of suffering. Humans, to be sure, join in communities, ecosystems, and rhizomatic assemblages with plants, but these multifaceted interactive formations do not usually involve a compassionate rapport. It is thus questionable whether one can be *with* the plants at all, precisely because the prospects of "suffering with" them are severely restricted.

The attitude of pity is perhaps more inclusive of all living beings than compassion, even though the difficulties it raises outweigh any advantages it might yield. At its worst, it objectifies the pitied creatures, treats them from the standpoint of moral superiority, and, therefore, bars the possibility of mutual determination that would unite the one who pities and the object of pity. This is why, according to Nietzsche's observations, it multiplies suffering, rather than put an end to misery, and revels in reactive affect.<sup>7</sup> Pity is the emotional supplement to the very injustice it sanctions, the injustice to which it bows, as though to the iron necessity of fate. Pitying the trees cut down to clear space for a highway does not prevent but, in fact, makes it easier to carry on the practices of deforestation accompanied by this most heartfelt emotional appendage. Resigned in the face of the ruthless logic of (contrived) economic necessity, pity permits the subjects who indulge in it to perceive themselves as caring individuals, not as participants in a cold-blooded destruction of the environment.

In contrast to the symmetrical community of sufferers that comes together in compassion, on the one hand, and the asymmetrical, condescending attitude of pity, on the other, empathy is an attempt to get in touch with the experience of the other *qua* other, or, literally, to feel *into* the other, as the German *Einfühlung*

suggests and as Edward Titchner's English coinage from the early twentieth century affirms. Instead of compassionately suffering *with* the other or sensing pity *for* the other, empathy bears upon the other's psychic interiority, into which it probes by means of projective imagination. Why then should we think, as I suggested above, that empathy presupposes the "substantial sameness of the empathizer and the empathized with," disrespecting the difference of the other? Here, the example of plants—which is much more than an example—may illuminate the endemic problems of empathy in other domains of ethics. *In nuce*, the inaccessibility of the other's psychic interiority and of experience forces the empathizer to project her own feelings onto the other. Through empathy, I deposit in the other, as construed by me, something that is already in me and, thereafter, re-discover myself in the other. The paradoxes of this process come into the sharpest relief against the background of the plants' mode of being that sets ontological limits to the possibility of empathy and highlights the need for a non-anthropocentric grounding of vegetal ethics.

The seemingly bizarre question regarding empathy with plants was posed before Husserl by one of his translators, Dorion Cairns, in a series of philosophical conversations that took place in 1932. "When talking about animals," Cairns recalls, "Husserl distinguished *Menschen-tiere* <man's animals>, e.g., dogs and elephants, from *eigentliche Tiere* <authentic animals>...and spoke of a continuous decrease of the possibility of *Einfühlung* <empathy> as one descends the scale." Asked about empathy with plants, Husserl hesitated to classify them either as mere physical unities or as psycho-physical objects. "In the end," Cairns concludes, "I got no clear idea whether Husserl thinks of plants as limiting cases of *Einfühlung*, or not."<sup>8</sup> What remains clear is that the likelihood of empathy is grounded in the degrees of ontological proximity (and distance) between the human empathizer and the living object of empathy. The closer are the two ontologically—that is, the more similar their respective modes of being—the greater the possibility in question. Ontology, or, rather, ontological difference is the key to ethical phenomena.

In order to carve out an ethics of vegetal life that would be distinct both from the ethical treatment of animals and of the environment as a whole, it is necessary to outline certain features of the plants' ontology that set them apart from humans, animals, and inanimate things. Immediately, an old nominalist ambiguity that has been haunting Western metaphysics for millennia beclouds the proposed investigation: while the plant is not an inanimate being like a stone, its life is drastically dissimilar to human and animal vitality. Something in its ontology is in excess of the static condition of the inanimate thing, the condition which is itself a theoretical fiction premised on the logical principle of identity and non-contradiction<sup>9</sup>; something, as Plotinus has it, both distinguishes the branch of a plant from a stick and makes the former better than the latter (*Enneads* IV.4.28). The impersonal excess that has turned the life of plants into a fetishized mystery and has given rise to the early animist speculation does not foreshadow anything in animal or human existences. From the

anthropocentric point of view, vegetal life, so foreign to our own, is alien to life itself, with which human facticity is metonymically identified, so much so that pseudo-Aristotle (Nicolaus of Damascus) imputes to plants a “lifeless soul,” classifying them as deficient things and only secondarily as living beings (*De Plantis* 316a, 37-40 and 316b, 6).

Given the chronic inability of the metaphysical tradition to come to terms with the ontology of vegetation, the grounds for empathizing with the plant have also been missing, especially because the potential “object” of empathy has remained hopelessly obscure. The life of plants has been subject to the extremes of religious reverence and a blatant denial of its vivacity, the extremes *between which* empathy may be experienced. As we shall see below, an empathetic relation is allergic both to the “too much” of a noumenal reality that overwhelms the human (vegetal life as a fetishized mystery) and to the “too little” of pure materiality that leaves us coldly indifferent (vegetal life as the seat of a lifeless soul). The distance between the elusive principle of the plant’s vivacity and human existence seems, therefore, to forbid the kind of intimacy and identificatory projection of the I onto the other that are the cornerstones of empathy.

By way of overcoming the pervasive metaphysical obscurity surrounding the philosophical status of vegetation, a sober comparison of the plants’ forms of life to those of animals and humans points toward the specific markers of difference, at the level of ontology, that erect further barriers to an empathetic identification with vegetal beings. As opposed to animals and humans, plants live without psychic interiority; they lack the metaphysical distinction between the “inside” and the “outside” and do not set themselves in opposition to the environment that sustains them.<sup>10</sup> Their unimaginable passivity exceeds by far the pathos that invites empathy, precisely because they live without feeling, or, at the very least, without feeling themselves feel. Capable of registering stressful environmental stimuli and reacting at the level of biochemical changes in the cells of leaves and stems, plants do not suffer in the same way as sentient beings permeated by a network of nerves. When humans empathize with plants, they, thus, ultimately empathize with themselves, turning the object of empathy into a blank screen, onto which essentially human emotions are projected. A presumably sensitive ethical approach veers on the side of instrumentalization, in that it uses the plant as a means for personal catharsis and an outlet for the content of bad conscience.<sup>11</sup> The plant, with which one empathizes, ceases to be a plant and, instead, is utilized as a support for human self-identification, for the anthropocentric and narcissistic machine that, God-like, fashions the entire world after its own image. This “formal” dissimilarity between vegetal life—free from the enclosure of psychic interiority, endowed with a material and extended soul, defying all notions of individuality and organic totality<sup>12</sup>—and the sentient existence of animal and human beings is one of the most serious obstacles to a rigorous philosophical justification of an empathetic relation to plants.

If empathy literally means “feeling into,” its basic operation will be disrupted as soon as it comes across vegetal beings that lack the depth into which this, or any other, feeling may probe. A corollary to the absence of something like a noumenal soul or psychic interiority in plants is that their life processes cannot be understood in behavioural terms on the model of either human conscious conduct or animal instinct. To be sure, vegetal life exhibits a nonconscious intentionality of its own, for instance in the plant’s striving toward the light of the sun and the mineral nutrients hidden in the earth.<sup>13</sup> The plant may be even said to “have a world,” in the sense of working on the world and working with it, modifying the environment of which it is an integral part, and being the zero-point of a particular orientation to its milieu. Yet, the vegetal “having” of the world does not mean that plants “possess” and “appropriate” their environment. The sense of their world, or, to paraphrase Heidegger, the worldhood of plants, cannot be assimilated to the human being-in-the-world through a formal analogy imputing to them a different kind of autonomy, mastery, or personhood.<sup>14</sup> For this reason, also, an empathetic understanding of plants will falter.

Husserl foreshadows the flight of the plants’ world from our grasp, when he states that his approach “would therefore not exclude plants’ having sensitivities after all; it only means that we would be incapable of recognizing them, because there is lacking any bridge of empathy and of mediately determined analysis.”<sup>15</sup> Vegetal sensitivities, if there are any, remain unrecognizable because they are not similar to those of humans and higher animals and, moreover, because all the tools at our disposal, including empathy and rational-analytic mediations, are impotent when it comes to bridging these sensitivities with our own. In the face of this impossibility, the question arises: How could one draw together the world of human beings and that of plants, while resisting the temptation to sacrifice the specificity of either perspective? What could fulfill the function of bridging the two worlds, all the while maintaining them apart and respecting the foreignness of vegetal life?

If empathy envisions an articulation of two separate worlds, standing for two ontological approaches to the environment, it offers an immediate mediation grounded in passion, an emotional projection that fails to preserve what is distinct about the existence of plants. Empathy functions by analogy, or, in the phenomenological vernacular, by analogical appresentation, rendering the inaccessible experience of the other legible as a function of the presumed parallel established between that experience and my own. As Edith Stein maintains in her doctoral dissertation on the problem of empathy supervised by Husserl, the experience of the other should be conceived on the basis of the other’s givenness “as a sensitive, living body belonging to an ‘I’”, the living body that “not only fits into my phenomenal world but is itself the center of orientation of such a phenomenal world.”<sup>16</sup> The plant, too, is “a center of orientation” to the world, but its “body,” which is a loose conglomerate and a non-totalizable multiplicity of vegetal bodies, does not belong to an “I” and

does not follow the course of subjective individuation. The limits of empathy here bleed into the edges of phenomenology, extended to existences other than human and charged with the task of outlining the non-anthropocentric orientations to and ways of being in the world.

A more subtle method of inviting the rapprochement of the human and the vegetal worlds entails shrugging off the metaphysical excesses of “spiritual” anthropocentric ontology and affirming the essential superficiality of the human psyche and the crucial role of nonconscious intentionality in any embodied existence. From Nietzsche’s famous claim that there is no doer behind the deed,<sup>17</sup> through Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body, to Deleuze and Guattari’s “plateaus,” exposing the illusion of subjective depth, late nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophy, however unwittingly, brought the meaning of the human into the greatest proximity to the being of plants. At the extreme, to empathize with plants is to recognize in ourselves certain features of vegetal life, rather than to project the metaphysical image of human existence onto other life-worlds. This uncanny recognition has been somewhat more prevalent in poetry than in philosophy, with the Portuguese author Fernando Pessoa and the French writer Francis Ponge embracing, if only as unattainable ideals, various aspects of plant ontology, including existence “without the head”<sup>18</sup> (Ponge), or the simplicity and blissful ignorance, where the lack of consciousness is redoubled by the absence of self-consciousness<sup>19</sup> (Pessoa). Reversing the trajectory of narcissistic identification, whereby the empathizers empathize, in the last instance, with themselves (or, at best, with what is very much like them), the appreciation of the vegetal other in the human implodes the entire anthropocentric theo-metaphysical edifice. While we do not recognize ourselves in plants, we register something of the plants in us, so that the failure of recognition, not to speak of self-recognition, becomes productive of an ethical relation to vegetal life.

Despite its intricacy, the poetic-philosophical rapprochement of the two ontologies disallows empathy and compassion alike. The difference between the human and the plant, the distance between the one and the other, the foreignness of the one to the other are accentuated by the very efforts at surmounting them. The means for imagining a human communion with plants and of adopting various features of their existence act, precisely, as barriers to establishing a unity with them: poetic writing—though it is, both in the case of Pessoa and in that of Ponge, quasi-phenomenological, unadorned, descriptive, pointing “back to the things themselves”—sets the writers apart from the vegetal world. It is, most likely, in reaction to this paradox that Ponge desires to write and to think from the position, from the standpoint, and from the spatial perspective of the plant.<sup>20</sup> And yet, even this interjection of the human in the place of the vegetal other does not amount to an empathetic relation predicated on projective identification but to Levinas’s ethical “substitution in separation,”<sup>21</sup> so that the I puts itself in the position of the other, taking care not to annihilate the other’s alterity, or to Deleuze and Guattari’s “becoming-plant,”



as a step in the series of molecular becomings breaking down the identity of the subject to the point of “becoming-inorganic” and “becoming-imperceptible.”<sup>22</sup> The very conditions of possibility for empathy are undercut in ethical substitution as much as in the string of becomings, to the extent that they dispense with the identity and the consolidated unity of subjectivity. Such undermining of empathy, in turn, facilitates an ethics of vegetal life attuned to the plants’ unique ontology and sensitized to their non-identity, the disseminated multiplicity of their being.

To be fair, in Edith Stein’s phenomenological account of empathy, the unity of the empathizer and the empathized with is neither presupposed nor actually accomplished. Through empathy, Stein argues, “the feeling of oneness and the enrichment of our own experience become possible,” provided that this feeling is not interpreted as an indicator of the actual unity with the recipient of empathy.<sup>23</sup> Phenomenologically speaking, the “feeling of oneness” derived from empathy does not attain fulfillment in experiential evidence. Even so, it betrays the ontology of vegetal life dispersed into a multiplicity of sub-individual growths<sup>24</sup> that forego the arrangement of the parts of plants—root, stem, leaves, flower, and so forth—into the totality of an organism. When transposed onto the world of vegetation, the empathetic unity of the I and the other erases, in addition to the difference between the two, a significant facet of plant ontology, according to which the other is not one. The vegetal other, above all, cannot be gathered into a whole in itself, let alone along with something or someone else. What finally thwarts empathy is the ontological scale of vegetal existence incommensurate with that of a human subject: the Nietzschean sub-individual growths take place on a scale that is too minuscule to be registered on the subjective radars detecting nothing but the concrete unity of identity. Now, the metaphysical projections of plant ontology run into a diametrically opposed problem of the vegetal scale that is too broad and overwhelming to elicit an empathetic response from a human subject. In continuing to explore the limits of empathy, it is worthwhile to consider the splitting of the metaphysical *imago* of vegetal beings, on the one hand, into a fantastic exaggeration, whereby they are identified with nature, the world, or spirit as such, and, on the other, into the analogs of everything that is superficial, dispensable, and antiquated in human and animal bodies.

### **Metaphysical Projections of Plant Ontology**

The extraordinary metaphysical projection of vegetation onto a magnitude of universal proportions spans the writings of the philosophers of antiquity, as much as of modernity. Plotinus imagined the soul of the world in the shape of an enormous plant; Hegel saw in the plant and its stages of development, growth, and maturation a metaphor of spirit; Novalis pictured nature as a gigantic tree, on which we are the buds.<sup>25</sup> The sheer impersonality of plants and the collapse of the distinction between the individual and the collective in their being give vegetal ontology enough flexibility to metonymize the whole

whereof it is a part, to stand in for nature as a global movement of generation, growth, and decay. Although it is difficult, if not impossible, for humans to recognize themselves in the non-individuated being of plants amplified to the entire world, the second metaphysical projection, mapping animal and human organs onto the plant, creates a series of morphological and structural-functional homologies that facilitate such recognition. Both materialist and idealist philosophers resort to what we might call *the tactics of ontic-biological translation*: Lorenz Oken and Goethe deem the flower to be the highest stage of the plant's spiritual development and the equivalent of the head<sup>26</sup>; Julien La Mettrie equates foliage to the lungs, bark to skin, and roots to the digestive tract<sup>27</sup>; Gaston Bachelard, following Paul Claudel, refers to the tree's vertical position as a posture of "heroic uprightness."<sup>28</sup> As a consequence, these and other thinkers have domesticated the alien ontology of vegetation, rendering the ontic features of plants familiar through a reductive comparison to their animal and human counterparts. Taken together, the projections of the human onto the plant and of the plant onto the world are tantamount to a metaphysical transposition of the human onto nature as such, the transposition, where the domesticated and homologous fragments of vegetal life are used as the means in the narcissistic self-recognition of the human in the environment. (Let us recall, in this context, that the concept of narcissism is, itself, derived from the name of a mythical character—Narcissus—that was bestowed upon a flower, thereby completing the enchanted circle of the anthropomorphization of plants and the vegetalization of the world.)

It should come as no surprise that the morphological and structural-functional homologies are the material substitutes for the experience of empathy and, according to Husserl, the guiding threads for the hermeneutical exercises, upon which the biological sciences are predicated. "The obvious kinship between brute [*Tier*, animal] and plant" requires a firm foundation that would be neither intuitive nor empathetic; that is why

[t]he universal and completely indefinitely performed empathy that permits the analogy is not enough for the investigator; he needs concrete experience of concrete sensitivities related to concrete organs, whereby the analogy of the plant organs with brute-animal ones... must be broad enough to ground the probability of the interpretation.<sup>29</sup>

Sound biological conclusions, interpreting the correlations of concrete sensitivities and concrete organs, take the place of "indefinitely performed empathy," which operates with a vague sense of similarity between figures of animal and plant lives. Philosophers in the Western metaphysical tradition have relied, by and large, on the hazy figurations of the animal in the plant and, thus, have fallen prey to the kind of empathy Husserl criticizes in *Ideas III*. Still, what the vague empathizers and the careful practitioners of biological hermeneutics have in common is that they privilege the ontic dimensions of different kinds of life, while altogether disregarding ontological difference.

Abstract and concrete comparisons miss the sole and the most valuable contribution philosophy can make to the question of life (and of lives), namely, the adumbration of its ontological and ethical status.

If, as Heidegger notes, the difficulty of thinking non-human living beings is that, though similar to us, they are far removed from humans by the “abyss” of “our ek-sistent essence,”<sup>30</sup> then the ontological grounding of biological parallelisms must supersede both empathy and the biological strategies of interpretation. Heidegger, on his part, presupposes that plants and animals do not participate in the existential ontology of *Dasein*—a presupposition that is all the more doubtful, considering the plurality of existences and points of access to the world that correspond to particular ontologies, including that of vegetal life. Once ontological investigations geared toward worlds and existences other than human are advanced enough to offer a rejoinder to Heidegger, the similarities between various beings will also need to be rethought along ontological lines. It is this re-thinking that could give rise, for example, to the notion of ontological empathy, no longer determined by ontic similitude but, instead, by a sense of proximity to the *being* of other creatures (e.g. the essential superficiality and nonconscious being-in-the-world of humans and plants). Any future rapprochement between humans and other beings will unfold on the terrain of post-metaphysical philosophy, which will be exceptionally attentive to the ontological uniqueness of non-human existences and mediate between various ontologies without privileging the standpoint of the human *Dasein*.

When it comes to the metaphysical projections of plant ontology, however, few are as damaging, theoretically and ethically, as Hegel’s reflections on vegetal life. In keeping with the trend of establishing facile ontic analogies between different classes of beings, Hegel draws the parallel between the foliage of plants and the “coverings” of animal bodies. As he states in lectures on aesthetics, the “real seat of the activities of organic life remains veiled from our vision; we see only the external outlines of the animal’s shape, and this again is covered throughout by feathers, scales, hair, pelt, prickles, or shells. Such covering does belong to the animal kingdom, but in animals it has forms drawn from the kingdom of plants.”<sup>31</sup> The ceaseless multiplication of material extensions and the empirical diversity of shapes and colours in the vegetal and animal kingdoms is contrasted to the “real seat” of organic life, which is hidden, withdrawn from sight, non-phenomenal, inner, and, hence, spiritualized. The metaphysical distinction between the inside and the outside rules over the entire comparison and delineates, in advance, the differential value judgments bestowed upon the diverse manifestations (and non-manifestations) of life. The “too much” of material proliferation stands in a direct proportion to the “too little” of metaphysical deficiency: the more vibrant, exuberant, and vegetal the external outlines of a life—the more insignificant, impoverished, and sometimes reduced to a naught, the inner dimension of the creature’s spiritual life. Beauty as such has not yet risen to the level of a concept, when it is shattered into the bewildering variety of shapes and colors, evincing the vegetal

heritage of animal beings. Plant and animal externalization of life, devoid of an interior, withdrawn, separate core, is not, in Hegel's view, an appropriate object of empathy, be it aesthetic or cognitive or ethical, for the spiritualized humanity.

What, then, of the human body? Does it inherit the ontic features of vegetal life? Whereas in his philosophy of nature Hegel is willing to admit that the skeletal endo-structure of all bodies harkens as far back as the mineral world, negated and sublated by the soft muscular and fatty tissues that surround the bones, in the texts on aesthetics he is more reluctant to acknowledge this dialectical heritage. In the lectures on fine art, the human body is thoroughly spiritualized, so much so that it becomes identical to sensitiveness and sensitivity, no longer obstructed by external coverings:

The *human* body, on the contrary, stands in this respect at a higher stage, since in it there is everywhere and always represented the fact that man is an ensouled and feeling unit. The skin is not hidden by plant-like unliving coverings...The skin itself...permits the inner life to shine through it...<sup>32</sup>

The outer dimension of human existence is a translucent screen for the life of the mind; the nakedness of the skin that makes one ever more physically vulnerable and unprotected exhibits a renewed spiritual strength of the inaccessible and inviolable inner life. The human exposure thus invites empathy as effectively as plant and animal hiddenness and protection of the body repels empathetic overtures.

It remains implied in Hegel's writings that the identification with the aesthetic ideal of the human—an essentially North European ideal, as it turns out—is contingent upon a barefaced denigration of animal and vegetal existences. Not only does the complete sensitization and vulnerability of the naked, hairless, and dis-closed human body elicit the strongest sense of empathy, but also the rise of this body in the course of a discussion of “the beauty of nature” is contrasted to animal and vegetal corporealities, which repel empathetic overtures and with which it is impossible to identify. The unliving, plant-like coverings, presumably absent from the surface of the human body are, at once, the protective shields against pain and the embodied barriers to empathy, starkly contrasted to the human flesh that is “everywhere...ensouled and feeling.” To *feel into*, in the German sense of *Einführung*, this flesh, which is in itself a sign of potential suffering, is to empathize with the inner life it transmits in all its outer manifestations; in other words, it is to gain access to the spiritual realm through a body entirely suffused with *Geist*, the body idealized, refined, and sublated to the extent that it turns into a material imprint of spirit. The rarification of corporeality, its rendering subtle and amenable to the expression of inner life (think, in this respect, of the Leibnizian “subtle matter” as a point of articulation of the body and the soul), thus coincides with its winnowing from the vegetal heritage of excessive material proliferation.

At this point, at the apex of natural beauty already verging on the ideal beauty of art as it is construed in the lectures on aesthetics, I would like to put forth what some might consider a vulgar reading of Hegel. The idealization of the human body, in a process completely entangled with the body's near de-materialization and cleansing of all remnants of plant and animal life,<sup>33</sup> hinges, I suggest, on the valorization of a particular contextually and historically bound ideal of the North European corporeality. The subtle racism inherent in the construction of a hairless and spiritually transparent body joins forces with the overt speciesism that pits plants and animals, taken to be aspects of "petrified nature," against the living logic of spirit. Nowhere is the imbrication of racism and speciesism more obvious than it is in *Philosophy of Nature*, where, in the course of discussing the role of light in the development of the vegetal self, Hegel remarks: "The externality of the subjective, selflike unity of the plant is objective in its relation to light...Man fashions himself in more interior fashion, although in southern latitudes he, too, does not reach the stage where his self, his freedom, is objectively guaranteed."<sup>34</sup> To those familiar with Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of history such statements will not sound shocking: in the South, Hegel believes, the fashioning of human subjectivity is quite plant-like, largely determined by light, and, therefore, neglectful of subjective interiority. In turn, those who are externally determined are not free; heteronomous beings—a category that, in Hegel, encompasses the entire kingdom of plants and humans "in southern latitudes"—do not contain the principle of their activity within themselves and fail to set themselves up in opposition to their environment as purposeful subjects. As a consequence of dialectical cunning, the human and the plant cease to be monolithic concepts: beneath the veneer of empathy with the North European ideal of man, Hegel implies, lies the shared mode of being of plants and human beings living in the global South.

Just as, preferring the hour of dusk and inner luminosity, dialectical thought shies away from the external light, to which the plant tends, so the Hegelian system as a whole negates the immediacy of life, elevating physical vitality to the level of spiritual existence. Dialectical empathy with the plant becomes possible on the condition that vegetal beings make a transition from merely living things to symbols animated by culture; a dried flower turns into the medium, wherein *Geist* can finally recognize itself. In a letter dated "July 17, 1797," Hegel invokes a garland of dry flowers offered to him as a sign of friendship "that unites parted friends". "The flowers are of course dry," he writes, "and life has vanished from them. But what on earth is a living thing if the spirit of man does not breathe life into it? What is speechless but that to which man does not lend his speech?"<sup>35</sup> More precisely, the dead flowers turn into a double medium, an outlet, first, for empathy with the other (the missing friend) who is also pained by the separation and, second, for self-recognition in an element of nature transformed through human activity. Dialectically speaking, dry flowers preserved as a memento are *more* living

(living qualitatively differently, better, more intensely, more authentically) than those growing in a field; the trees chopped down to create space for a new highway and made into furniture lead a spiritual afterlife ensured by the fact that “the spirit of man” has breathed life into them. Empathy with merely living things would, conversely, betoken an unmediated attempt at an emotional penetration into nature, in other words, something of a regression from the dialectical point of view. Spirit’s ingress into the domain of its other (nature, wherein it does not yet recognize itself) is such that it productively destroys, through rational activity, whatever it touches—a task that empathy accomplishes at the level of affect by negating alterity conceived by analogy with the empathizer. Dialectical empathy with the plant circumvents such immediacy by incorporating the dead flower into the mediately living spirit and vicariously endowing this flower, combined with others like it in a garland, with spirit’s depth, inner life, and universal meaning. Affect itself is synthesized with reason when what elicits it is a product of human activity, be it as insignificant as the dry flower preserved as a reminder of an absent friend.

The price paid for dialectical empathy is of course steep, since it demands that natural life be extinguished before getting rekindled in the higher regions of spirit. Similar to other metaphysical currents in philosophy, Hegelian dialectics construes the floral world as ontologically impoverished, lacking in *X* (be it consciousness, sentience, autonomy, or animation), and as a seat, simultaneously, of empirical excess and transcendental deficiency to be compensated for by dialectical re-birth. The metaphysical recognition of the human in the plant is conditioned by this construal: the plant is a defective animal, a being in which humans detect everything they are not or, better yet, everything they do not wish to be. The splitting and repression of those aspects of humanity that do not live up to the ideal construct “man” precede the projection of these very aspects onto vegetal life in a cross-species psychological transference. Empathy—an offshoot of our domination over and violation of ourselves—thus assumes two forms: on the one hand, it stands for a negative and unconscious acknowledgement of what we do not want to be, what we have expelled from our midst and attributed to the vegetal other; on the other hand, it signifies a last-ditch attempt to “feel into” what we are not supposed to feel, to reconnect, in a quasi-Feuerbachian fashion, with the disavowed features of humanity projected onto non-human existence. In any event, empathy serves exclusively human subjects, who rely on it to construct their ideal selves or to retrieve alienated features of their own existence. If one is to imagine an ethics of plants, then empathy, with its implicit self-referentiality and narcissism, needs to be non-dialectically overcome.

## Notes

- 1 “For we are like tree trunks in the snow. In appearance they lie sleekly and a little push should be enough to set them rolling. No, it can’t be done, for they are firmly wedded to the ground. But see, even that is only appearance.” Franz Kafka,

- “The Trees.” I thank Marcia Cavalcante-Schuback for bringing this short story to my attention.
- 2 See Michael Slote, *The Ethics of Care and Empathy* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007); Lou Agosta, *Empathy in the Context of Philosophy* (London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Richard Wilson and Richard Brown (eds.), *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), among others.
  - 3 I am greatly indebted to Patricia Vieira, with whom I discussed, in a series of conversations over the course of the Summer 2010, the crucial differences between these three terms.
  - 4 Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 301.
  - 5 “We suffer *with* him [*Wir leiden, mit ihm*] and hence *in* him; we feel his pain as *his*, and do not imagine that it is ours. In fact, the happier our state, and hence the more the consciousness of it is contrasted with the other man’s fate, the more susceptible we are to compassion.” Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, trans. E.F.J. Payne (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 147.
  - 6 Gary Steiner, *Anthropocentrism and its Discontents: The Moral Status of Animals in the History of Western Philosophy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 187.
  - 7 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Nietzsche Reader*, ed. by Keith Ansell Pearson & Duncan Large (New York & London: Wiley Blackwell, 2006), 488.
  - 8 Dorion Cairns, *Conversations with Husserl and Fink* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), 74.
  - 9 For a critique of the determination of the thing as an inanimate object, see Michael Marder, *The Event of the Thing: Derrida’s Post-Deconstructive Realism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).
  - 10 G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature: Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences, Part II*, translated by A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 307.
  - 11 Although clandestine instrumentalization might occur in other instances of empathy, where the object is another human being, I limit myself here to the consideration of an empathic approach to vegetal life.
  - 12 “No doubt, it is hard to decide, even in the organized world, what is individual and what is not. The difficulty is great, even in the animal kingdom; with plants it is almost insurmountable.” Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2005), 10-1.
  - 13 For a detailed discussion of the plants’ nonconscious intentionality, see Chapter V of Michael Marder’s *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
  - 14 Such an analogy is advocated, for example, by Matthew Hall in “Plant Autonomy and Plant-Human Ethics,” *Environmental Ethics* 16 (2009): 169-181.
  - 15 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. Book 3: Phenomenology and the Foundations of the Sciences*,

- in *Edmund Husserl Collected Works, Vol. I*, trans. by Ted Klein and William Pohl (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1980), 8-9. (Hereafter, *Ideas III*.)
- 16 Edith Stein, *Zum Problem der Einfühlung* (Verlagsgesellschaft Gerhard Kaffke: München, 1980), 3/6.
- 17 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. by Maudemarie Clark and Alan Swensen (Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett, 1998), 25.
- 18 Francis Ponge, *Nouveau Nouveau Recueil, 1967-1984* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 106.
- 19 Fernando Pessoa, *Obra Poetica* (Rio de Janeiro: José Aguilar, 1969), 206.
- 20 Ponge, *Nouveau Nouveau Recueil*, 109.
- 21 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 54.
- 22 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (New York & London: Continuum Press, 2004), 303.
- 23 Stein, *Zum Problem der Einfühlung*, 9/16-7.
- 24 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufman and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 374.
- 25 Novalis, *Fragmentos de Novalis*, ed. by Rui Chafes (Lisboa: Assirio & Alvim, 1992), 54.
- 26 Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 269.
- 27 Julien de La Mettrie, *Man a Machine and Man a Plant*, trans. by Richard Watson and Maya Rybalka (Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett, 1994), 78.
- 28 Gaston Bachelard, *L'Air et les Songes: Essai sur l'Imagination du Mouvement* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1943), 266.
- 29 Husserl, *Ideas III*, 8.
- 30 Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. by David Farrell Krell, revised and expanded edition (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1993), 230.
- 31 G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, translated by T. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 145.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 146.
- 33 Admittedly, this idealization is never complete, since “the poverty of nature equally finds expression in this surface [of the body] by the non-uniformity of the skin, in indentations, wrinkles, pores, small hairs, little veins, etc.” (Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 146.)
- 34 Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, 306.
- 35 Quoted in Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. by John P. Leavey and Richard Rand (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 154/left.