Common or Garden

Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany
By Matthew Hall
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Reviewed by Lorraine Shannon

To open a book review by saying that a major problem facing our beleaguered Earth is the multitude of human persons it struggles to support is, I have to admit, somewhat uninspired. However, a sense of personhood and its categorisation is so fundamental to Matthew Hall's fascinating and timely book that I will risk a humdrum opening in order to emphasise how crucial personhood is to our estimation of what constitutes a life of value; whether we seek, on the one hand, to restrict it to humans, each with their claim to individuality, a right to the good life, and superiority to other species; or, on the other hand, whether we might consider expanding the borders of personhood to embrace some of the other more-than-human inhabitants of this planet. Of course, to regard ourselves as wholly in charge of such a choice appears, yet again, to place all responsibility and action in the hands of humans. Could this be our over-blown hubris asserting itself yet again, or are we capable of listening and learning from the botanical 'voices' that surround us?

For a considerable part of its history Western culture has displayed a great talent for imagining itself to be in charge of all and sundry. Sadly, this fixation on our organising abilities has overshadowed our equal talent for surrender and cooperation. By fostering such underrated abilities, by re-positioning ourselves on the control/surrender spectrum we could begin to re-envision a world in which the simplicity of hierarchies is replaced by collaboration with the complex and unpredictable processes of nature. Such a re-shuffling of ourselves might enable entire ecosystems including humans to flourish in relational, ethical ways. Needless to say, in today's world this is of paramount importance. Matthew Hall believes a change of attitude is imperative and has set out to consider ways in which Western culture, in particular, might expand its emotional engagement with the natural world in a more inclusive and responsible manner.

This is big, brave thinking but Hall does not over-step the mark and propose unrealistic, utopian solutions to what ails us. Just as animals, especially mammals, have increasingly been seen to possess sentience and personhood, so plants, he argues, may also be accorded a 'voice' to promote their right to moral consideration. This book is, therefore, an important and thought-provoking intervention into environmental writing, opening up a field of enquiry that

is both long overdue and essential for the healthy survival of earth, including its more-than-human botanical others. Indeed, this is the premise from which Hall starts: that the natural world is threatened by human activity and as it is plant biomass that enables our continuing existence we need to explore ways of behaving more appropriately towards plants.

Given the ecological crisis facing the planet today, to continue to adhere to beliefs and practices in which plants are mere passive resources can only prove disastrous to all forms of life. It is finding appropriate ways of behaving that is crucial; of recognising an affinity with other beings in the face of clear and obvious alterity. Until now the idea of forming meaningful relationships with members of the plant world would have been classed as absurd and the nitty-gritty of how to relinquish this sense of the absurd and replace it with connectivity is a challenging business. Be assured, however, Hall does not belong to any simplistic 'new age' or non-material approach to life, nor does he advocate plant personhood as a form of anthropomorphism. There is no attempt to project human-like qualities where they do not belong. Nor is there any naïve argument that attributes human faculties to plants. Instead, plants are understood as living beings with their own, very different, perspective and with the ability to communicate in their own way. It is by acknowledging a shared volition and intentionality in all natural beings that we can start to work towards attaining a new, all-inclusive understanding of personhood. Hall sets this process in motion by analysing human perception and behaviour towards plants from two opposed perspectives, philosophies of exclusion and philosophies of inclusion, and comes down strongly in favour of inclusion. He asks how we might move from a stance of exclusion and domination to one of inclusion and care and what this might entail for humans as an integral part of ecosystems.

First, we could try focusing on our shared characteristics of life and growth rather than on gross differences. We need, Hall claims, to develop 'manners of speaking' that are not concerned with objective truth but are 'modes of interacting with reality which render our world meaningful and guide our actions therein' (158). From an ecological perspective, health and well-being are enhanced by increased connectivity and allowing other species and ecosystems to grow and continue their existence. Here, of course, is the catch. Finding appropriate ways to act, to treat plants with respect, is a fraught and contentious business. Hall argues that in the West we can learn from other cultures and religions as well as from those Western discourses that have been relegated to the margins.

To this end, the book is organised into two main sections in which chapters one to three examine Western streams of thought and are in essence a diagnosis of the problem. Chapters four to six are a search for solutions. Hall moves through

a critical analysis of Western philosophy, examining how it moved from animism to Empedocles' philosophy in which traces of animism still provided recognition of the ontological connection between plants and humans, to philosophies such as Aristotle's in which the vegetable soul representing botanical life is placed at the bottom of the heap with humans at the apex. Plato, also, was instrumental in developing a hierarchical structure of beings in which plants are portrayed as passive and mindless. They exist not to live and flourish as themselves but to provide food for humans and animals.

Other lesser-known figures are also explored, such as Theophrastus who made detailed observations of the plant world. He deduced that plants should be approached on their own terms as different from animals, having their own goals in life and not existing to satisfy mankind's needs. Instead plants actively enjoy thriving and seek to fulfil their own purposes. Just as human/animal bonds have formed to the benefit of both parties—people and dogs are one obvious example—so Theophrastus argues that plant cultivation may not necessarily be a form of plant 'slavery' but a reciprocal, mutualistic relationship.

Unfortunately, these promising outlooks were side-lined and the philosophical heritage that has been favoured in the West draws on Aristotle and Plato for its view on plants. It can be traced through to the present via such figures as Francis Bacon and the Enlightenment philosophy of Descartes along with Cartesian rationalism. Hall also ranges through the works of prominent early botanists before moving on to examine the ways in which Christian doctrine contributed to the perception of plants as wholly passive, radically other and devoid of the 'breath of life.' This negative assessment is balanced by recent developments in eco-theology and leads into the second section that teases out the specific differences among the complex and often contradictory attitudes towards vegetation found in influential Jain, Hindu and Buddhist texts. Inevitably, to cover such a huge canvas, these analyses have been accomplished using broad brush-strokes but they are, nevertheless, more than adequate to back up Hall's point. Eastern cultures are not reduced to a mere foil for Western shortcomings. There is, for instance, an acknowledgement that discourses relegating plants to passive, inferior status are evident in several major Buddhist schools and in Hindu texts such as the *Vishnu Purana*. Hall ranges through a wide selection of texts and includes Western critiques concerning the appositeness of Eastern philosophies for present-day ecological discourse. In general, though, he presents strong evidence, particularly in the Vedanta school of Hindu philosophy, of a basic sense of the connectivity of all beings. All things, including plants, have shared faculties and emerge from Brahman. All things, including plants, participate in the cycle of death and rebirth. It is here that difficulties may arise

for Western readers unfamiliar with or unsympathetic to ideas on reincarnation as, overall, the various understandings of ontological connectivity tend to revolve around concepts of rebirth, karma and Buddha nature.

Chapter five is more thoroughly grounded in the phenomenal world and has a certain resonance with early, eclipsed Western outlooks. It examines Indigenous animisms with their worldview of interpenetrating plant, animal and human realms. It is this aspect of the book—its analysis of the possibility of a respectful relationship coexisting with human-plant predatory relationships that is, in my opinion, one of the abiding strengths of this book. It refuses romanticisation and squarely faces up to the fact that doing harm to sentient others is unavoidable, indeed an essential part of being alive. How much more comfortable to deny sentience and volition to plants, to feel free to hybridise them as we wish, to plant them in huge monocultures, coat them in chemicals, devour, destroy and waste them as we please. Hall contrasts this simplistic, use-oriented approach to that of animism, understood as a sophisticated way of being in the world and knowing the world. As a relational ontology it claims that acknowledgement of plant personhood and plant use is not incompatible.

It is kinship relationships that provide for inclusion in Indigenous animist societies. Specific, local kinship relationships recognise shared ancestry with other beings and involve obligations of care and responsibility. Part of this responsibility is recognising and accepting that we must inevitably violate the integrity of plant persons; that we cannot avoid killing them. There is no glossing over this stark reality. Life and death, creation and destruction are intertwined and inseparable. This is life at is most real, at its messiest. If we in the West are to reorient our vision of the world and remain mindful of the serious environmental problems facing us, there is no escaping this difficult dilemma—but neither is there a need for breast-beating, hair-shirts and repentance. Taking the life of plant persons is an integral part of being in the world and a necessary part of living. However, the harm done cannot be ignored. The solution, Hall argues, is to avoid waste, misuse, utilitarianism and over-consumption and to foster awareness of plant persons as part of the social fabric. We need to substitute hierarchy with heterarchy. We need to re-conceptualise animist notions of transformation from one phase of life to another from an ecological perspective. And 'new' animism, along with 'new' paganism is attempting to do just that. Hall cites Graham Harvey's *Animism* along with contemporary Paganism as hopeful signs that Western cultures are re-examining old notions and re-appropriating them in order to bring about positive change. Moreover, he argues, they may have allies in the scientific community. 'The view of plant scientists', Hall writes, 'is changing so rapidly that botanical texts may soon serve Earth-based religions for inspiration as much as the pre-Christian scriptures' (135).

What follows is a fascinating chapter of data from the botanical sciences. It documents evidence that contradicts beliefs in the 'inferior' attributes of plants, such as lack of movement, sensation and mentality. Although some of the findings outlined in this chapter remain contentious, they present a strong argument for recognising the capacities and capabilities of the plant kingdom. Hall traces from Darwin such ideas as plant perception, communication and movement before examining contemporary research in the plant sciences in which plant intelligence, reasoning and problem solving are posited.

Overall, this book is a 'must read' for anyone interested in the state of the environment today, whether professionally or as a concerned citizen. It does not simplify the issues but has managed to attain that elusive balance between remaining accessible and readable without sacrificing intellectual range, subtlety and complexity of thought. Perhaps I can summarise my thoughts on this book by simply saying this is a book I wish I had written.

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