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Plant Ethics: Concepts and Applications

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Plants pose a tricky conundrum for philosophers. Their centrality to all life on this planet remains undisputed by ecologists and yet the emphasis on moral and ethical dilemmas posed by the nonhuman inhabitants we share the earth with has focused upon our animal companions. Even within environmental philosophical thought, the marked invisibility of the plant world mirrors our own complacency about the plant kingdom in our unavoidable and commonplace encounters with plants. This point is made well by the editors of this book, as they offer up a range of author responses to the issue of how we can relate ethically to plants. Their agenda is to highlight the resistance towards including plants in the vocabulary of environmental philosophy by opening up discussion towards a more interdisciplinary perspective (although there is a definite precedent within the movement that is not directly alluded to within the book).

Angela Kallhoff (2014) has a track record with her work on plants' agency and right to flourish, and this book consolidates the idea that such a seemingly absurd notion as 'plant rights' needs to be questioned and explored so that the marginalisation of plants within western philosophy can be addressed. Why is this work needed? The book attempts to address this question through its division in to two parts, given away in its title – concepts and theories are presented first and then the application of theory to real world situations. It is unsurprising that some of the chapters in Part Two are more successful than others in this endeavour, given the complexity of our mostly unconscious, unaccountable relationship with plants as a homogenous category. Plants appear to lack agency in any recognisable way such as characterises our relationships with animals, and a book such as this may always struggle to overcome this blindness in our species. In response, and in its favour, the writings contained within the book acknowledge the need to avoid straining the credibility of ethical consideration of plants: for example, a classical Kantian philosophical concept of dignity is an inappropriate basis for plant ethics. Several authors opt for discussing a biocentric approach as opposed to a justice-orientated plant ethic, because this is perceived as having more utility in promoting the rights of plants through a knock-on effect of benefits for humans. In fact, such a relational ethical approach versus a more overtly eco-centric approach is not particularly novel within environmental philosophical discourse. Since its early inception the genre has grappled with arguments between anthropocentric and eco-centric arguments, succinctly highlighted in the fractious disagreements between Deep Ecology and Social Ecology over the years. By engaging with the need and justification for Plant Ethics, the editors reignite this debate in

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a lively fashion. Their use of philosophical concepts to unpack these thorny issues throughout the first part of the book assumes that the audience is well versed in the nuances and history of environmental philosophical debates and ideas, and perhaps limits the appeal of this book for non-specialists.

In Part One, the main thrust of the philosophical debate revolves around unpacking a longstanding argument for non-human rights based on intrinsic worth rather than instrumental value, which was promoted by Deep Ecologists in the early 1980s and was itself a derivative of Aldo Leopold's (1949) influential stance on 'The Land Ethic'. In chapter 3, Sandler expands on this basic premise to examine another crucial element of a more-than-human ethical consideration by asking whether plants can experience suffering. Other chapters within Part One develop these themes, although Sandler's is easily the most accessible to readers without an academic philosophical background, as he responds to objections for a plant ethic using classical philosophical discursive devices. Also of interest to environmental philosophical discourse are arguments made in chapter 7 by Pouteau that begin to treat plants as truly post-modern subjects by unravelling questions of plant agency as commensurate with consciousness, as the basis for a specific epistemic approach to the subject that distinguishes itself from debates regarding animal ethics.

It is in the application of these debates in Part Two that the book attempts to square the circle by rendering abstract concepts into cross-disciplinary relevance. For the most part this is treated in a fairly muted manner within the first few chapters of Part Two, where the connection between the theories carefully explored in Part One and the practical examples in Part Two is somewhat occluded. D'Angelo makes a fair attempt in chapter 11 to follow up Cronon's (1996) exposure of 'the wrong sort of nature' by exploring discourse around wilderness in opposition to cultivated landscapes, whilst chapters 14 and 15 both attempt similar debates focusing attention on human and plant relationships within the garden, with more than a cursory nod to Brook's (2008) seminal work on 'the picturesque'. These thoughtfully presented ideas incorporate notions that the 'picturesque' rather than such a slippery ontological term as 'wilderness' is more worthy of consideration as the prime example of quotidian encounters between human and plants in ways that give rise to a spontaneous ethical relationship with plants.

The writing in this book really finds its stride when approaching the notion of hybridity – that is, the interface between plants and technology – within environmentalism, once again leaning on work from a previous era in philosophical discourse, namely that of Sarah Whatmore (2002). Deconstructing terms such as 'natural' and 'technological' raises a variety of interesting considerations for ethics that in turn promote a range of strikingly nuanced moral judgements about plants as beings. The last two chapters make resoundingly coherent arguments for such hybridity, in that it can break down rigid definitions of differences between humans and plants, increase our awareness of

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plants and promote greater responsibility towards them. These arguments are a refreshing counterpoise to a type of activist environmentalism that dismisses technological interventions into the life-world, although it must be stated that it remains to be seen how this heightened awareness might cross over to fertilise the majority of human/plant encounters beyond more rarefied specialist encounters.

Overall the book is an important dialogic engagement with controversies concerning first, the necessity for plant ethics and secondly, how a plant ethic could manifest itself in embodied human and plant engagements. It takes influential environmental and philosophical debates – present from the inception of the discipline – and uses that fertile soil to nourish the work presented by editors and authors alike. The debates contained within its chapters may seed future growth within the discipline through an appeal to our desire for philosophical and ethical clarity and how this might bridge a perceived conceptual abyss with the Plant Kingdom in ways that allows for mutual co-operation on the planet we share.

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