Learning to Be Addressed by Trees:

Vegetal Empathy, Ecological Intentionality, and the Limits of the Human

Sam Harrelson, PhD Student (Ecology, Spirituality, and Religion)
California Institute of Integral Studies
sharrelson@mymail.ciis.edu

I. Introduction: From Recognition to Address

The recent resurgence of philosophical attention to plants, often described as the "vegetal turn," has unsettled deeply entrenched assumptions about life, agency, and ethical relevance. For much of the Western philosophical tradition, plants were treated as marginal beings that were alive but inert, organized but passive, necessary for life yet confirmed only as background to animal and human worlds. Recent work in philosophy, environmental humanities, and plant sciences has challenged this picture, emphasizing vegetal responsiveness, communication, memory, and relationality.[1] Yet, despite these developments, the conceptual frameworks through which plants are interpreted frequently remain anthropocentric. Plants are often granted ethical significance only insofar as they resemble animals or humans, whether cognitively, affectively, or communicatively.

Empathy has emerged as a key category within these discussions. To empathize with plants, it is suggested, entails overcoming plant blindness, cultivating moral imagination, and fostering more reciprocal ecological relations.[2] But empathy, particularly as commonly understood in modern discourse, entails significant conceptual risks. Even when carefully defined, empathy often presumes the availability of an interior life that can be imaginatively accessed, mirrored, or felt-with. When applied to plants, this presumption can subtly re-center the human as the arbiter of meaning, positioning vegetal life as ethically legible only when it can be translated into human affective terms.

---

[1] Marcello Di Paola, *The Vegetal Turn* (Cham: Springer, 2024).
[2] James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schussler, "*Preventing Plant Blindness*," American Biology Teacher 61, no. 2 (1999): 82–86.

This paper argues that plants call for a different mode of relational engagement and one that doesn't depend upon recognition, resemblance, or projection. Rather than asking how humans might empathize with plants, I propose that vegetal life invites humans to learn how to be addressed. *Address* doesn't imply speech, intention, or communicative reciprocity. It indicates a phenomenological situation in which human attention is interrupted, reoriented, and transformed by encountering a form of life that resists assimilation.

To develop this argument, I place four bodies of thought into sustained dialogue from Aristotle's account of the vegetative soul, Matthew Hall's proposal of empathy for plants, Michael Marder's philosophy of vegetal expression, to Edith Stein's phenomenology of empathy. Taken together, these sources allow for the articulation of ecological intentionality as a disciplined mode of attentiveness through which plants matter without being humanized. Ecological intentionality doesn't claim access to vegetal interiority or construct an ontology of observation. Rather, it names instead a receptive posture shaped by patience, vulnerability, and ethical restraint.

II. Aristotle and the Vegetative Soul: Life Without Perception

Any serious philosophical engagement with vegetal life must reckon with Aristotle's foundational account of the soul (*psychē*) in *De Anima*. Aristotle famously distinguishes among three primary kinds of soul: the vegetative (or nutritive), the sensitive, and the rational.[3] Plants possess only the vegetative soul, which enables nutrition, growth, and reproduction. They lack sensation (*aisthēsis*), desire (*orexis*), and intellect (*nous*). For this reason, Aristotle denies that plants perceive, feel pleasure or pain, or act deliberately.

[3] Aristotle, *De Anima*, II.1–4.

At first glance, this framework appears to justify the marginalization of plants. Without sensation or awareness, plants seem incapable of experience, relationship, or ethical significance. Yet such a reading misses the conceptual weight Aristotle assigns to the vegetative soul itself. The nutritive soul is more than a minimal placeholder and is the condition of life as such. Without it, no higher form of soul could exist. Aristotle writes that the vegetative soul is "the first and most common power of the soul," shared by all living beings.[4]

Crucially, the activities of the vegetative soul are not random or externally imposed. Growth, nutrition, and reproduction are internally organized processes oriented toward continuation and flourishing. A plant grows toward light (artificial or from the radiation from our closest star), extends roots toward water, and repairs damage without what we as humans might imply as deliberation or perception. This isn't mechanical or "conscious" directedness as understood, but it is teleological in a non-deliberative sense. Aristotle thus attributes to plants a form of purposiveness that doesn't depend on awareness.

Modern philosophy often collapses intentionality into representational mental states, thereby excluding plants by definition. Aristotle's account resists this collapse. While plants do not intend objects in the way humans do, they nonetheless exhibit directed life activity. This distinction opens space for rethinking vegetal agency without projecting cognition where none exists according to modern models of that term.

Elaine P. Miller has argued that the vegetative soul represents a mode of being that modern philosophy has repeatedly attempted, and failed, to suppress.[5] Growth, dissemination, and efflorescence resist the sovereignty of the subject and the clarity of representation. Vegetal

[4] Aristotle, *De Anima*, II.4.
[5] Elaine P. Miller, *The Vegetative Soul* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012).

life troubles philosophical accounts that privilege autonomy, self-awareness, and mastery. Plants are entangled within the world but do not stand as subjects over against it.

This Aristotelian framework has important implications for contemporary debates about plant ethics and empathy. If vegetal life is fundamentally non-perceptual yet purposive, then ethical relations cannot be grounded in shared experience or mutual recognition. Plants do not encounter the world as humans do, nor do they encounter humans at all in any recognizably reciprocal sense. Ethical engagement with plants must therefore proceed without assuming symmetry.

Recent work in environmental ethics has returned to Aristotle to explore alternative accounts of flourishing (*eudaimonia*) that are not restricted to rational agents.[6] Such accounts emphasize conditions of thriving appropriate to different forms of life. For plants, flourishing involves soil integrity, ecological stability, and temporal continuity rather than subjective satisfaction. This shift challenges empathy-based models that rely on affective identification.

Aristotle thus provides a crucial starting point for vegetal philosophy, not because he offers a complete account, but because he clarifies what is at stake. Plants are alive in a way that is meaningful yet irreducible to perception, consciousness, or expression. Any attempt to relate to plants ethically must grapple with this asymmetry rather than attempting to resolve it through projection.

[6] Quentin Hiernaux, "*The Ethics of Plant Flourishing*," Philosophies 6, no. 4 (2021).

III. Matthew Hall and the Promise, and Risk, of Vegetal Empathy

Matthew Hall's *Plants as Persons* represents one of the most sustained efforts to counter the philosophical marginalization of plants by expanding ethical and ontological categories beyond the human and animal realms. Drawing on botany, environmental philosophy, and Indigenous epistemologies, Hall argues that plants are not passive objects or mere resources but active participants in ecological communities whose lives are structured by responsiveness, relationality, and vulnerability.[7]

Central to Hall's project is the rehabilitation of empathy as an ethical capacity capable of bridging human–plant divides. In contrast to narrow definitions of empathy as emotional contagion or imaginative projection, Hall proposes a broader understanding of empathy as openness to other ways of being.[8] Empathy here is not about feeling what another feels but about cultivating attentiveness to relational presence and responsiveness. Hall explicitly argues that empathy doesn't require sameness, reciprocity, or shared sensory modalities.[9]

This expanded conception allows Hall to resist both mechanistic reduction and naïve anthropomorphism. Empathy becomes a practice of perceptual expansion, enabling humans to recognize vegetal life as expressive and responsive without reducing it to human categories.[10] In

[7] Matthew Hall, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 1–24.
[8] Hall, *Plants as Persons*, 55–60.
[9] Hall, *Plants as Persons*, 61–68.
[10] Hall, *Plants as Persons*, 72–78.

this respect, Hall's work aligns with broader ecological frameworks that emphasize relationality and interdependence rather than hierarchical models of agency.[11]

Hall's later essay, "*Empathy for Plants*," refines this position by addressing critiques of anthropomorphism more directly.[12] He acknowledges the danger of projecting human emotions onto plants but argues that complete abstention from empathetic engagement reinforces alienation and instrumentalization. For Hall, empathy functions as a corrective to *plant blindness*, the pervasive tendency to overlook vegetal life altogether.[13] Without some form of empathetic attunement, plants remain ethically invisible and easily sacrificed.

There is much to commend in Hall's approach. He refuses the false choice between sentimental anthropomorphism and reductive materialism, insisting instead that ethical attention is always mediated by imagination and perception.[14] His emphasis on attentiveness bears strong similarities to ecological ethics, which foregrounds care, responsiveness, and situated perception.[15]

Nevertheless, Hall's reliance on empathy introduces unresolved tensions. Even in its expanded form, empathy remains a human-centered act**.** It is humans who empathize, humans who imagine, humans who feel-with. The ethical visibility of plants thus risks becoming contingent upon human affective engagement. When empathy becomes the primary ethical lens, plants may matter most when they are emotionally compelling or symbolically resonant.[16]

---

[11] Marcello Di Paola, "*Introduction*," in The Vegetal Turn: History, Concepts, Applications, ed. Marcello Di Paola (Cham: Springer, 2024), 1–18.
[12] Matthew Hall, "*Empathy for Plants*," Environmental Ethics 44, no. 2 (2022): 121–136.
[13] Hall, "Empathy for Plants," 124–127.
[14] Hall, "Empathy for Plants," 129.
[15] Prudence Gibson, *The Plant Thieves: Secrets of the Herbarium* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2023), 18–35.
[16] Hall, "*Empathy for Plants*," 132.

This limitation becomes especially pronounced in the case of long-term or slow vegetal processes that resist affective immediacy. A centuries-old tree, a dormant seed bank, or a stressed root system undergoing gradual decline doesn't readily solicit empathy in the way animals in visible distress do.[17] Empathy tends to privilege immediacy over duration, event over process, and visibility over persistence. As a result, vegetal life unfolding on extended temporal scales may remain ethically marginal even within empathy-centered frameworks.[18]

The issue here is not that Hall is wrong to emphasize empathy, but that empathy alone may be insufficient as a foundation for vegetal ethics. An ethical relation to plants requires a stance that isn't dependent on emotional resonance or imaginative access. Plants matter not because they move us effectively (or affectively), but because they persist, sustain, and exceed us.[19]

This tension points toward a necessary conceptual shift, from empathy understood as *feeling-with* to attentiveness understood as *being-addressed*. Rather than asking whether humans can empathize with plants, the more generative question becomes whether humans can allow plants to interrupt their expectations of agency, communication, and value. Such an interruption doesn't guarantee understanding or emotional connection, but it does transform ethical orientation.[20] Hall's work performs an indispensable preparatory function by dismantling

---

[17] Matthew Hall, "*Empathy for Plants*," Environmental Ethics 44, no. 2 (2022): 121.
[18] James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schussler, "*Preventing Plant Blindness*," American Biology Teacher 61, no. 2 (1999): 86.
[19] Hall, "*Empathy for Plants*," 124–127.
[20] Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 85–112.

plant blindness and reopening empathy as an ethical capacity, and creates the conditions for a more restrained, non-assimilative form of attentiveness to emerge.[21]

IV. Michael Marder and Vegetal Expression Beyond Subjectivity

Michael Marder's philosophy of vegetal life offers one of the most sustained and philosophically rigorous attempts to think plants outside the conceptual inheritance of Western subjectivity. In *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, Marder argues that plants have been persistently misunderstood because they have been measured against inappropriate ontological standards, either as deficient animals or as inert matter (due in part to the interpretative tradition of Aristotle).[22] Rather than attempting to rehabilitate plants by granting them quasi-human capacities, Marder insists that vegetal life must be approached on its own terms, according to its distinctive modes of existence, expression, and vulnerability.

Central to Marder's account is the claim that plants are expressive without being subjects. Expression, in this context, doesn't refer to intentional communication or symbolic meaning. Instead, it names the material unfolding of life through growth, branching, rooting, and exposure. Plants express themselves spatially and temporally rather than linguistically. Their life is written into the world through form and persistence rather than through acts of will.[23]

This insistence on non-subjective expression marks a decisive break with anthropocentric frameworks. Plants are materially entangled with soil, air, water, fungi, insects, and light (radiation). Marder describes this condition as one of radical exposure, as plants cannot retreat

[21] Gibson, *The Plant Thieves: Secrets of the Herbarium*,18ff.
[22] Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 1–12.
[23] Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 47–66.

into themselves or withdraw from the world.[24] Their vulnerability isn't accidental but constitutive. To live as a plant is to live exposed.

This exposure carries ethical weight. Whereas animals may flee or defend themselves, plants remain rooted, absorbing the consequences of environmental change directly into their bodies. Their suffering, if that term is even appropriate, isn't episodic but distributed across time. This challenges ethical frameworks that prioritize acute pain, immediacy, or recognizable distress. Vegetal life demands attention to duration, accumulation, and slow violence.

In "*To Hear Plants Speak*," Marder sharpens this point by resisting metaphorical accounts of vegetal communication.[25] Plants do not "speak" in any symbolic sense according to our human senses, nor do they transmit messages awaiting interpretation by our conceptual framework of human language. Chemical signaling, mycorrhizal networking, and phototropic responsiveness are not languages to be decoded but forms of relational responsiveness embedded in ecological systems. To insist on translation into human semiotics is already to miss what is most distinctive about vegetal expression.

Marder's critique thus aligns with broader concerns within the vegetal turn regarding anthropomorphism and projection. Yet his work also raises a further problem. If plants express themselves without subjectivity and without intention, how are humans to respond ethically without either instrumentalizing that expression or aestheticizing it? Ontology alone doesn't generate ethical practice.

---

[24] Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 94–112.
[25] Michael Marder, "*To Hear Plants Speak*," in The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature, ed. Monica Gagliano, John Ryan, and Patricia I. Vieira (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 155.

Marder gestures toward a response through the concept of *phytophilia* as a love of plants that precedes utility, knowledge, or mastery.[26] Phytophilia isn't sentimental affection but a dispositional openness to vegetal alterity. However, without phenomenological grounding, phytophilia too risks remaining an aesthetic or affective stance rather than a disciplined ethical posture, as it is grounded in observation, projection, and human sensory ontologies.

This is where the concept of address becomes crucial. To be addressed by plants doesn't require attributing consciousness or intention to vegetal life. It requires acknowledging that vegetal expression can disrupt human attentional habits (in a phenomenological sense). Plants do not invite dialogue directly. Instead, they impose slowness, dependence, and exposure. They resist being rushed, summarized, or mastered despite the best (or worst) intentions of human technologies.

Ecological intentionality emerges here as a phenomenological complement to Marder's ontology. Where Marder articulates what plants are, ecological intentionality clarifies how humans might remain with vegetal life without reducing it to subjectivity or symbol. The ethical task isn't to make plants speak, but to learn how to "listen" without demanding speech.

V. Edith Stein and the Limits of Empathy

Edith Stein's phenomenological analysis of empathy (*Einfühlung*) provides a crucial counterpoint to contemporary appeals for empathy toward plants. In *On the Problem of Empathy*, Stein offers one of the most precise accounts of relational knowing in twentieth-century philosophy or theology. Empathy, she argues, is neither an emotional contagion nor an

[26] Michael Marder, "*The Place of Plants in Contemporary Philosophy,*" Journal of Speculative Philosophy 26, no. 3 (2012): 351.

imaginative projection, but a distinctive intentional act through which the experience of another is given as belonging to that other.[27]

For Stein, empathy is an original mode of givenness. I do not infer the other's experience, nor do I construct it imaginatively. Rather, the other's experience appears to me as non-original, as lived by someone else.[28] This non-originality isn't a deficiency but a structural feature of empathy itself, as empathy preserves difference and asymmetry even as it establishes relational access.

This emphasis on preserved alterity is especially important for vegetal philosophy. Much contemporary discourse assumes that ethical relation requires imaginative access to another's interiority. Stein's thought complicates this assumption. Empathy doesn't require sameness, reciprocity, or emotional resonance. It requires *openness* to being affected by an "other" whose experience I cannot possess.

At the same time, Stein is careful to delimit the scope of empathy. Empathy is directed toward experiencing subjects. It presupposes a center of lived experience, even if that experience remains partially inaccessible. Plants, however, do not present themselves phenomenologically as experiencing subjects. They do not appear as beings who live through joy, suffering, intention, or perception in any recognizable sense by humans.

This isn't a failure of Stein's framework but one of its most important contributions. Stein shows that extending empathy indiscriminately risks misunderstanding both empathy and

---

[27] Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraut Stein (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1989), 3ff.
[28] Stein, *Empathy*, 10–12.

vegetal life. To claim empathy where there is no experiential givenness is to collapse empathy into projection or metaphor.

Yet Stein's work doesn't foreclose ethical relations with plants even though she addresses the natural world rather than plants or vegetal kin specifically. Instead, it clarifies that such a relation must take a different phenomenological form. In *Finite and Eternal Being*, Stein emphasizes that beings disclose themselves according to different modes of givenness and that ethical responsiveness must be attuned accordingly.[29] Not all beings are given as subjects, and not all ethical relation depends upon subjectivity.

Stein's later work on community, personhood, and ontological gradation reinforces this point. Ethical responsibility doesn't arise solely from shared experience but from encounter with being as such.[30] To be encountered doesn't require being experienced from within. Presence itself can place a demand upon the perceiver.

From this perspective, the limits of empathy are not obstacles to vegetal ethics but may act as guides. They indicate where another intentional structure becomes necessary as one oriented not toward interiority but toward presence, exposure, and persistence. Ecological intentionality emerges precisely at this boundary. Empathy reaches its boundary not because plants are ethically insignificant, but because empathy presupposes a mode of experiential givenness that vegetal life doesn't present. Ecological intentionality, therefore, doesn't extend empathy; it replaces it with a posture appropriate to beings who are present without being subjects.

---

[29] Edith Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, trans. Kurt F. Reinhardt (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2002), 363
[30] Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 381–390.

Ecological intentionality also doesn't attempt to replace empathy but to situate it in habitual horizons and experience. Where empathy is appropriate, among experiencing subjects, it remains indispensable. Where empathy reaches its limit, ecological intentionality takes over, preserving ethical attentiveness without projection or observation-based ontology.

Stein's insistence on humility before alterity thus becomes foundational for vegetal ethics. Rather than forcing plants into human frameworks of experience, Stein helps us recognize that ethical relation can occur without comprehension, reciprocity, or imaginative access. Such restraint isn't ethical impoverishment but ethical maturity.

VI. Ecological Intentionality: Practice, Attention, and Ethics

Ecological intentionality names a mode of attentiveness that emerges precisely where empathy, as traditionally understood, reaches its phenomenological boundary.[31] Unlike empathy, ecological intentionality doesn't aim to access interiority or to inhabit another's experience imaginatively. Instead, it is oriented toward *being addressed* and toward receiving the presence of another without demanding disclosure on human terms.[32] Being addressed here indicates an intentional relation without objectification, in which attention is oriented not toward grasping meaning but toward sustaining receptivity to presence as such.

Intentionality, in phenomenological terms, refers to the directedness of consciousness.[33] Ecological intentionality retains this directedness but alters its posture. Rather than directing

[31] Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 10ff
[32] Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 52.
[33] Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2000), 114–132.

consciousness toward objects to be known or subjects to be understood, ecological intentionality suspends mastery and allows attention to be shaped by encounter itself.[34]

This form of intentionality resonates with recent work in environmental humanities and qualitative research that emphasizes listening, patience, and relational transformation. Sarah Abbott argues that encounters with trees require methodological openness rather than interpretive closure.[35] Knowledge arises through sustained presence, not extraction. Similarly, Natasha Myers emphasizes that plant sensing challenges researchers to reconfigure their own perceptual habits and epistemic expectations.[36]

John C. Ryan's notion of being "called" by plants provides a helpful articulation of this posture.[37] The call is not verbal, symbolic, or intentional in a human sense. It is temporal, affective, and ethical. Plants "call" by persisting, by growing slowly, by exceeding human timescales. To respond to this call is not to interpret meaning but to allow one's own patterns of attention to be reshaped.[38]

My sustained encounters with trees, particularly through repeated, intentional encounters with a black walnut tree at our home in the Piedmont of the Blue Ridge Mountains, have reinforced this insight. What becomes apparent over time isn't vegetal interiority but vegetal alterity. The tree doesn't reveal itself as a subject to me. Rather, the black walnut reveals the

---

[34] Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 385
[35] Sarah Abbott, "*Approaching Nonhuman Ontologies: Trees, Communication, and Qualitative Inquiry*," Qualitative Inquiry 27, no. 8–9 (2021): 1059
[36] Natasha Myers, "*Conversations on Plant Sensing: Notes from the Field*," NatureCultures 3 (2015): 35–66.
[37] John C. Ryan, "*On Being Called by Plants: Phytopoetics in the Phytosphere*," Plant Perspectives 1, no. 2 (2024): 258–275.
[38] Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 94–112.

limits of my expectations of agency, responsiveness, and control. Ecological intentionality thus emerges not as understanding but as transformation.[39]

This transformation has ethical consequences. As Robin Wall Kimmerer has argued, ecological crises are rooted not only in extractive practices but in failures of attention and relationship.[40] Vandana Shiva similarly emphasizes that ethical engagement with plants requires learning from vegetal modes of resilience, reciprocity, and embeddedness rather than imposing external frameworks of value.[41]

Ecological intentionality resists both instrumentalization and romanticization. It doesn't require plants to be persons or assume human characteristics, senses, or ontologies. Similarly, it acknowledges that vegetal life sustains human life while remaining irreducible to human categories. Ethical relation becomes a matter of restraint, care, and participation rather than comprehension.[42]

Conclusion: Empathy and Ethics Without Assimilation

Plants and vegetal life confront philosophy with a peculiar and enduring challenge that they matter without mirroring us. They do not perceive the world as we do through our human senses, given evolutionary and situational contexts; they do not speak in ways we can readily translate, and they do not present themselves as centers of experience available to empathetic access. And yet, they persist quietly, vulnerably, and indispensably shaping the conditions of life that make

---

[39] Marjolein Oele, *E-Co-Affectivity: Exploring Pathos at Life's Material Interfaces* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2020), 143–168.
[40] Robin Wall Kimmerer, "*The Serviceberry: An Economy of Abundance*," Emergence Magazine, November 26, 2024.
[41] Vandana Shiva, "*Seeds and Plants as My Teachers of Ethics*," in Vegetal Entwinements in Philosophy and Art, ed. Giovanni Aloi and Michael Marder (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023), 219–232.
[42] Quentin Hiernaux, "*The Ethics of Plant Flourishing and Agricultural Ethics*," Philosophies 6, no. 4 (2021): 91.

all other forms of experience possible. If philosophy has too often overlooked plants and vegetal life, it isn't because they lack significance, but because they resist the conceptual habits through which significance has traditionally been recognized.

This paper has argued that vegetal life exposes the limits of anthropocentric models of empathy and invites a reorientation of ethical attention. Aristotle clarifies that plants are purposive without perception, alive without awareness, directed without deliberation. Hall insists that ethical blindness toward plants isn't a neutral omission, but a moral failure rooted in habits of attention. Marder shows that plants express themselves without subjectivity, exposing themselves to the world without retreat. Stein, finally, teaches us that ethical relation begins not with possession or understanding, but with humility before alterity and that empathy itself has limits that must be respected rather than overcome.

Taken together, these perspectives converge on the crucial insight that ethical relations do not require assimilation. Plants do not need to be persons, subjects, or experiencers in order to matter. Nor do they need to be rendered legible through human affective frameworks. What they require and what they invite is a different mode of intentionality altogether.

Ecological intentionality names this shift. It isn't a new faculty or a technique to be mastered, but a reorientation of attention cultivated over time. Ecological intentionality doesn't ask what plants are like or what they feel. It asks how long we are willing to remain. It asks instead how human perception, temporality, and responsibility are transformed when vegetal life is allowed to appear on its own terms. It is an intentionality shaped less by comprehension than by endurance, by staying with what cannot be quickly understood and embracing the asymmetry when we humans seek symmetry and predicative order.

This posture has been central to my own sustained encounters with trees, especially the black walnut. Over time, what becomes apparent isn't vegetal interiority but vegetal persistence. The tree doesn't present itself as a subject awaiting knowledge. It discloses the inadequacy of my expectations, my impatience with slowness, my desire for response, and my tendency to equate relation with reciprocity. To sit with a tree repeatedly across seasons is not to gather information but to be re-formed as a perceiver. Attention is stretched, duration thickens, and agency is decentered.

Learning to be addressed by trees is also learning to remain by resisting the urge to translate every encounter into meaning or utility. Such restraint runs counter to dominant ecological and environmental discourses that emphasize management, optimization, and control, even when framed in the language of care. Ecological intentionality doesn't deny the need for action, but it insists that action must be grounded in practices of attention capable of sustaining difference.

This insistence has ethical and political implications. Contemporary ecological crises are not only crises of technology or policy; they are crises of relationship. As thinkers such as Robin Wall Kimmerer and Vandana Shiva have argued, ecological devastation is inseparable from epistemologies that reduce more-than-human life to resource or backdrop. Addressing climate change, species loss, and habitat degradation requires more than scientific knowledge, as it entails a transformation in how humans situate themselves within living systems.

Ecological intentionality contributes to this transformation by refusing the fantasy of mastery. It acknowledges dependence without romanticizing harmony. Plants sustain human life while remaining indifferent to human narratives. They precede us, outlast us, and quietly exceed

us. To attend to them ethically is therefore to practice a form of humility that modern philosophy has often struggled to articulate.

This humility isn't passive. It demands discipline, patience, and the willingness to be changed without guarantees. It asks humans to listen without expecting speech, to care without control, and to act without full understanding. In theological terms, though this paper has deliberately remained restrained here, such attentiveness resonates with traditions that emphasize creatureliness, finitude, and gift. Vegetal life, in its quiet persistence, performs a kind of non-dramatic witness to these realities.

At the same time, ecological intentionality guards against sentimentalization. To be addressed by trees isn't to project wisdom onto them or to enlist them as moral teachers in a simplistic sense. It is to recognize that their mode of being unsettles human priorities and temporalities. The ethical demand that follows isn't to speak for plants, but to create conditions in which their flourishing isn't continually sacrificed to human convenience or conceptions of progress.

In this way, ecological intentionality reframes ethics as a practice of remaining with difference, vulnerability, and uncertainty. It offers an alternative to both domination and withdrawal. Against instrumentalization, it insists that plants are not merely means. In opposition to romanticization, it insists that plants are not mirrors. They are, instead, co-inhabitants of a world whose complexity exceeds any single form of life. Metaphysically, ecological intentionality presupposes a world not exhausted by subjects and objects, but composed of multiple modes of presence, persistence, and relation. Vegetal life thus becomes a test case for whether philosophy can think meaning without subjectivity.

To learn to be addressed by trees, then, is to accept that ethical relation doesn't always culminate in understanding or empathy. Sometimes it culminates in silence, patience, and altered orientation. In an age marked by urgency and extraction, such practices may appear insufficient. Yet it is precisely this insufficiency, this refusal to resolve difference, that preserves the possibility of care without domination.

If philosophy (or theology) is to respond adequately to vegetal life, it must learn not only to speak differently, but to listen differently. Ecological intentionality offers one path toward such listening, as a form of attending and intention that honors life beyond the human without requiring that it become human to matter.

Bibliography

Abbott, Sarah. "Approaching Nonhuman Ontologies: Trees, Communication, and Qualitative Inquiry." *Qualitative Inquiry* 27, no. 8–9 (2021): 1059–1071. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800421994954.

Ales Bello, Angela. *Edith Stein's Philosophy of the Human Person*. Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2000.

Aristotle. *De Anima*. Translated by J. A. Smith. In *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, edited by Jonathan Barnes, Vol. 1. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.

Calcagno, Antonio. "Edith Stein and the Question of Empathy." *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 84, no. 3 (2010): 401–420.

Di Paola, Marcello. "Introduction." In *The Vegetal Turn: History, Concepts, Applications*, edited by Marcello Di Paola, 1–18. Cham: Springer, 2024.

Gagliano, Monica. *Thus Spoke the Plant: A Remarkable Journey of Groundbreaking Scientific Discoveries and Personal Encounters with Plants*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2020.

Gibson, Prudence. *The Plant Thieves: Secrets of the Herbarium*. Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2023.

Hall, Matthew. *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011.

Hall, Matthew. "Empathy for Plants." *Environmental Ethics* 44, no. 2 (2022): 121–136. https://doi.org/10.5840/enviroethics20225237.

Hiernaux, Quentin. "The Ethics of Plant Flourishing and Agricultural Ethics: Theoretical Distinctions and Concrete Recommendations in Light of the Environmental Crisis." *Philosophies* 6, no. 4 (2021): 91. https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies6040091.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. "The Serviceberry: An Economy of Abundance." *Emergence Magazine*, November 26, 2024. https://emergencemagazine.org/essay/the-serviceberry/.

Kohn, Eduardo. *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013.

Macauley, David. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Tree: Appreciating the Beauty of the Arboreal World." In *The Wisdom of Trees: Thinking Through Arboreality*, edited by David Macauley and Laura Pustarfi. New York: SUNY Press, 2025.

Mancuso, Stefano, and Alessandra Viola. *Brilliant Green: The Surprising History and Science of Plant Intelligence*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2018.

Marder, Michael. *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

Marder, Michael. "The Place of Plants in Contemporary Philosophy." *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, no. 3 (2012): 351–364.

Marder, Michael. "To Hear Plants Speak." In *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*, edited by Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan, and Patricia I. Vieira, 155–168. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Marder, Michael, and Patricia I. Vieira. "Writing Phytophilia: Philosophers and Poets as Lovers of Plants." *Frame* 26, no. 2 (2013): 37–53.

Miller, Elaine P. *The Vegetative Soul: From Philosophy of Nature to Subjectivity in the Feminine*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2012.

Moran, Dermot. *Introduction to Phenomenology*. London: Routledge, 2000.

Myers, Natasha. "Conversations on Plant Sensing: Notes from the Field." *NatureCultures* 3 (2015): 35–66.

Oele, Marjolein. *E-Co-Affectivity: Exploring Pathos at Life's Material Interfaces*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2020.

Ryan, John C. "On Being Called by Plants: Phytopoetics in the Phytosphere." *Plant Perspectives* 1, no. 2 (2024): 258–275. https://doi.org/10.3197/whppp.63845494909733.

Shiva, Vandana. "Seeds and Plants as My Teachers of Ethics." In *Vegetal Entwinements in Philosophy and Art: A Reader*, edited by Giovanni Aloi and Michael Marder, 219–232. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023.

Stein, Edith. *On the Problem of Empathy*. Translated by Waltraut Stein. Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1989.

Stein, Edith. *Finite and Eternal Being*. Translated by Kurt F. Reinhardt. Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2002.

Wandersee, James H., and Elisabeth E. Schussler. "Preventing Plant Blindness." *The American Biology Teacher* 61, no. 2 (1999): 82–86.