THEME 02

A plant-centered view of the world

CLIMATE CHANGE | PARADIGM SHIFT | SUSTAINABILITY

It is common knowledge that plants are responsible for all life on earth. However, their existence, species, workings, history, etc. are barely part of our basic education, politics, legal systems, philosophy and cultural heritage. As contemporary philosopher Emanuele Coccia puts it, at some point in the history of ideas, plants were forgotten. With climate change as the biggest challenge of our time, this could change. A new worldview might be on the rise, one in which vegetal life takes a more central position. What will such a worldview look like and how will this affect our lives?

Our observations

- With concerns about the rising CO2 level in our atmosphere, appreciation of plants is increasing, as they offer natural climate solutions. In a recent video by Swedish activist Greta Thunberg and *The Guardian* journalist George Monbiot, plants are portrayed as the saviors of the earth, the only realistic option we have to turn the tide regarding climate change. This message is in line with many other initiatives that opt for making more room for plants (mostly trees) on earth.

- Now that more data is becoming available about the workings of vegetal life, its story is becoming interesting to us. Earlier this year, for example, *BBC* published the idea of the wood wide web, explaining that trees communicate with one another through their roots. This gives insight into life underground, which is of great importance to life aboveground. One of the researchers compared the findings with knowledge about our brain: "Just like an MRI scan of the brain helps us to understand how the brain works, this global map of the fungi beneath the soil helps us to understand how global ecosystems work."

- As we wrote before, climate change forces us to reconsider our relationship with nature. Various paradigms that offer arguments for doing so are emerging: 1) climate change is costly; 2) climate change puts our health and safety at risk; 3) nature is intrinsically valuable and should therefore be safeguarded. This last rationale is called "deep ecology". It emerged in the 1970s and aimed to replace the anthropocentric worldview (humans are the most important entity in the universe) with the Age of Ecology, in which man is part of nature and has no special place in the cosmos.

- Although interest in the life of plants is increasing, contemporary philosopher Emanuele Coccia argues in his book *The Life of Plants* that the way we think about them is still in concepts drawn from animal life. We have a so–called *zoocentric* biology. By using these concepts, not only are we misunderstanding the life of plants, we will also not be able to escape a view of plants as no more than passive beings, deprived of the ability to do and act, a mere means to an end. A paradigm shift away from an economic attitude towards nature (the first two paradigms in the previous observation) towards an attitude in which nature has intrinsic value (e.g. deep ecology) will then not be possible.

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Connecting the dots

Since the German idealism of the 18th century, Western culture has adopted a way of thinking in which nature (e.g. vegetal and inanimate life) is reduced to everything that doesn't have a soul and has no intelligence, no reasoning. This led science to separate between the humanities and natural sciences. When seen through the eyes of natural sciences, nature is transformed into a purely residual, mechanical and oppositional object, incapable of occupying the position of subject, as animals and humans can. In order to empathize with other living beings, biologist Von Uexküll was the first to introduce the idea of the *Umwelt* in the 19th century, which inspired famous philosophers such as Heidegger, Foucault, Deleuze and Agamben. *Umwelt* cannot simply be translated as "environment", since it refers not only to surroundings but also to the specific way in which each living creature experiences its environment. Because of the different senses and the various ways to survive, an environment entails different "carriers of significance" for each living creature. For example, a tick only senses heat, smell and amount of hairiness. Only the objects in its vicinity that carry such characteristics have significance to them. However, Von Uexküll only considered living creatures with organs able to have an *Umwelt*, to experience their surroundings in a certain way. His idea therefore enforced the separation between animal and vegetal life. This resulted in vegetal life largely being ignored outside the realm of science and agriculture: a man of the world knows all sorts of specifics about human history, mathematics, languages, politics, etc., but knowledge of vegetal life is not seen as something that has significance in this sense.
Our current basic education only provides a fraction of knowledge of the history, names or lives of plants or vegetal life in general. All the while, plants are absolute necessities to our lives: they provide oxygen and form the base of the food chain. In our daily lives, however, our appreciation of plants is mainly based on their decorative qualities. In fact, the life of a plant is not very appealing to us. To illustrate, the medical term for a permanent state of partial arousal rather than true awareness as a consequence of severe brain damage is "persistent vegetative state". In the debate on whether plants can have rights, opponents argue that there is no evidence that plants can experience pain, or anything else for that matter, since they have no senses like humans or animals do.
In *The Life of Plants*, Coccia aims to redefine our cosmological view by telling a different story of plants, one in which he tries to move away from our current zoocentric perspective on life. Coccia analyzes every aspect of plants — leaves, roots, flowers — and emphasizes the different principles that govern them. Some examples: Vegetal life is the sole link between inanimate phenomena and life, the one thing that can transform solar energy, water and inanimate matter into life. As such, plants are the only living species that do not need to feed off other living beings or live at their expense. A plant's life is both above- and underground, plants are constantly and directly exposed to the elements as they open to the world and merge with it. Plants contradict the idea of individualism as they can consist of older parts and new ones, in which different genetic identities can coexist (e.g. in big old trees). A plant can also be cut into pieces and instead of dying, reproduce. Unlike animals, for which development stops once the individual has reached sexual maturity, plants never cease to develop and grow, to (re)construct new body parts. Reproduction in the animal kingdom is usually between two animals, whereas in the kingdom of plants, sex is a cosmic event: it involves other animals or insects, such as bees, or, for example, rain and wind. One of the most important messages Coccia aims to express though, is that plants unite all that lives. He doesn't claim that everything can be reduced to vegetal life, but argues that, as plants produce our atmosphere, they provide a place where everything can come to life and make contact, species can mix without losing their own form or substance, that plants are the connective tissue that joins together all other forms of life; they're the link between animals, men, the earth, the sky. Finally, he argues that the origin of our existence is not a unique event light years away. The origin of the world is happening continuously by the leaves that surround us, like fish we swim in their sea called atmosphere.

Implications

- In an economic relationship, one party tries to get maximal return from the other party. It is therefore likely that, if we remain in an economic relation with nature, we will continue to exploit it since our profit will be the indicator of its value. In the long run, a paradigm shift towards, for example, deep ecology, might be needed to build a more sustainable relation that will dictate additional values than profit alone.

- The way we think influences the way we make decisions and organize our society. For many Hindus, for example, the cow is a sacred animal. A cow can therefore go where it pleases, cannot be slaughtered and needs to be treated with respect. If, through education, we become more aware of the role vegetal life actually fulfills in our world, it will likely come to serve a more substantial purpose in our society and daily lives than the current, mostly decorative and economic one. Will we, for example, continue to organize our politics in a democratic fashion? Democracy, after all, is a principle that was designed to meet the needs and ideas of human individuals. Will our constitution include clauses that do not only pertain to human or animal rights but also to vegetal life?

- Although criticized as a correct representation, one culture in history that is usually associated with a worldview that includes vegetal life as a prominent presence that is deeply connected to human life is that of Native Americans. One of their famous sayings is "We are the land", by which they mean that they are, in a very real sense, the same as the Earth. Another, fictional, example is of a Dutch children's book Children of Mother Earth, in which the author describes a society that considers vegetal life as something not to be disturbed. At one point, for example, a train is invented, but it is decided not to develop the idea any further because the natural environment would be damaged too much, which is against the society's principles. In order to develop a vision on how to realize a society with a more plant-centered view, we might increasingly turn to these kinds of examples.