

## The Oppression of Plants

By

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Yesterday someone joked about today's sermon subject, "*The Oppression of Plants!* You can't expect me to stop eating plants too." He knows, of course, that I don't eat meat because of my moral concerns—concerns I have sometimes hinted at from the pulpit. So if I should now suggest we stop eating plants too, we'd all end up starving to death. Still, there are those who argue that plants, like animals, are also alive, and that the argument for not eating meat based on compassion for other creatures and the general respect for life ought to logically carry over to plants. In brief, this argument ultimately suggests that vegetarians are hypocrites, that if we really had the courage of our convictions, we would not eat any living thing and allow ourselves to starve to death. I consider such reasoning, however, to be more about the justification of eating whatever we want, rather than an expression of concern for the plight of plants. I really have but one rule for eating that I strive to observe; *eat only those beings that invite you to eat them.*

Now some might think, "Gees, under that rule we'd all starve to death anyway. What creature is dumb enough to invite us to eat it?" It is true that many creatures exhibit the fight or flight response, an instinct that evolved specifically to keep them from being eaten. But there are also many creatures, at least among the plant kingdom, that don't fight or flee. Now some are, no doubt, thinking, "Duh, that's what makes them plants, they can't move." It reminds me of the joke about the two carrots that were playing in the street when one of them got run over by a car. At the hospital the doctor told the other carrot, "I've got some good news and some bad news. The good news is, your friend is going to survive. The bad news is, he'll be a vegetable all his life."

But seriously folks, while it is true that the survival of many creatures depends upon the fight and flight response, there are also many, if not more, that can survive only by being still and letting go; what we might call the *wise sage response*. These creatures, naturally, are plants, which, despite their lack of a central nervous system, have learned to have sex with each other, to reproduce themselves, and to send their offspring off to populate the whole world. They accomplish this amazing feat by borrowing the central nervous systems of creatures that can move about. In his *Origin of Species*, Darwin himself acknowledged, "there could have been no flower before there was an eye to see it."<sup>1</sup> This is so, because, even though underwater animals, sea creatures, were the first forms of life on Earth, plants were the first forms of life to crawl out of the sea onto land. The ancient evolution of animals happened about 700 million years ago, as compared to the evolution of

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<sup>1</sup> Sheldrake, Rupert & Fox, Matthew, *Natural Grace*, Doubleday, New York, NY, 1996, p. 59.

algae like plants that came on shore only about 425 millions years ago. As Lynn Margulis and Dorian Sagan explain in their book, *Micro-Cosmos*, “Algae dwelled in wet, sunlit shallows. Occasionally these shallows dried up, and those algae that could remain wet on the inside while dry on the outside had the evolutionary edge. They survived and multiplied to become the early plants—low-lying forms without stems or leaves, related to modern day mosses and liverworts, that could not support their weight out of water. Algae became the land plants by bringing water with them.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, plants represent a leap forward in evolutionary terms. They are more advanced than animals, at least more so than the animals they evolved from.

These nourishing plants eventually lured other animals out of the sea that wanted to take advantage of the tasty solar energy they had learned to store inside themselves. Early on the plants had learned the benefit of storing their genetic information in seeds that would reproduce only when environmental circumstances were ripe for survival. The evolving animals helped transport these seeds for population. As Michael Pollan explains in his book, *The Botany of Desire*, “All [that] plants care about is what every creature cares about on the most basic genetic level: making more copies of itself.”<sup>3</sup> But plants, unlike so many other creatures, learned to accomplish this task through cooperation instead of competition, through the wise sage instinct, instead of the fight/flight instinct. So, about 125 million years ago, animals developed the ability to see, and plants simultaneously developed the ability to flower and fruit. The trick is, plants don’t flower until they’re ready to reproduce, and their fruit remains camouflaged in green, until it is ripe. Colorful flowers and fruits express the sexual promiscuity of plants, conveying the message, “Here I am, come and get me!” So plants, when they’re in the mood for love, invite us to eat them. As Pollan puts it

“about a hundred million years ago plants stumbled on a way—actually a few thousand ways—of getting animals to carry them, and their genes, here and there. This was the evolutionary watershed associated with the advent of the angiosperms, an extraordinary new class of plants that made showy flowers and formed large seeds that other species were induced to disseminate. Plants began evolving burrs that attach to animal fur like Velcro, flowers that seduce honeybees in order to powder their thighs with pollen, and acorns that squirrels obligingly taxi from one forest to another, bury, and then, just often enough, forget to eat.”<sup>4</sup>

In a sense, then, plants are the greatest of fishermen because they bait their hooks, then sit quietly and patiently until something bites. But unlike fishermen, they don’t yank us from our world, batter and season us, then flop us into a frying pan. They nourish us and provide us with vital nutrients that keep us healthy so

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<sup>2</sup> Margulis, Lynn, & Sagan, Dorian, *Micro-Cosmos*, Summit Books, a Division of Simon and Schuster, New York, NY, 1986, 170f.

<sup>3</sup> Pollan, Michael, *The Botany of Desire*, Random House, New York, NY, 2001, p. xv.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. xx.

that we can move about, carrying their hitchhiking offspring with us. The plant fishers work strictly on a catch and release basis. And even though they are unconscious, and it may sound funny to ascribe anthropomorphic qualities to them, plants do express a quiet intelligence that in many ways seems to make them our superiors to this day. As biologist Rupert Sheldrake explains, “Flowers are in response to animals seeing them. Their perfumes have evolved along with the animals that smell them. Flowers have been around for at least sixty or seventy million years, whereas humans being haven’t been around for longer than a million or two”<sup>5</sup>

If we look at all these quiet sages, still and free of attachments, have been able to accomplish without moving or thinking, and without wasting a lot of time and energy to evolve consciousness, they truly are superior creatures worthy of our respect and awe. “The flower,” as Michael Pollan has noted, “has cleverly manipulated the bee into hauling its pollen from blossom to blossom.”<sup>6</sup> But the truth is, human beings are also subservient to plants even though we think they’re serving us. Margulis and Sagan write, “Our seniors on land, plants indeed seem very adept at seducing us animals, having tricked us into doing for them one of the few things we can do that they cannot: move.”<sup>7</sup> But plants don’t only borrow the central nervous system of other creatures; they have also developed properties for improving those central nervous systems. Carrots, for example, bright orange and easy to find for digging animals, are, as our mothers told us, particularly good for eyesight. Why would plants want us to have healthy eyes? Obviously, so that we can see them.

Through nutritional properties, many plants have developed the ability to actually improve our central nervous systems so that we can be more aware of our environment, and more aware of them. It makes sense that they would not only improve our eyesight so we can see their attractive colors, but also improve our brains so we can be more aware of our environment in general. Some plants, those containing psychotropic compounds, like peyote and ayahuasca, and even, as I believe, marijuana, specialize in consciousness expansion. Indeed, one of the great mysteries of evolution is the inexplicable growth of the hominid brain to three times its size in less than a million years, a rate that seems impossible in evolutionary terms. Some have suggested this may have been the result of our hominid ancestors coming into contact with these compounds for the first time. They are known, in fact, to stimulate the optic nerve so that those seeing the visions they induce, whether real or not, are really seeing them. Neurologically, these plant molecules appear almost identical to some of the molecular structures involved in brain chemistry. Chemical neurotransmitters such as serotonin, dopamine and epinephrine (adrenaline), for example, closely resemble the molecular structures of

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<sup>5</sup> Sheldrake & Fox, *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Pollan, *ibid.*, p. xiv.

<sup>7</sup> Margulis & Sagan, *ibid.* p. 174.

the psychoactive agents, psilocin, mescaline and methamphetamine. As anthropologist, Jeremy Narby explains it, "During the 1950's, researchers discovered that the chemical composition of most hallucinogens closely resembles that of serotonin, a hormone produced by the human brain and used as a chemical messenger between brain cells. They hypothesized that hallucinogens act on consciousness by fitting into the same cerebral receptors as serotonin, 'like similar keys fitting the same lock.'"<sup>8</sup> So, in a sense, we could say that some plants have the ability to literally open our minds.

And why have they genetically engineered us to be so intelligent. Could it be so that we could invent agriculture? This is precisely what many scientists are suggesting is the case. Margulis and Sagan say, "Our central nervous system and brain evolved as an adaptation to the eating of plants, and the eating of the eaters of plants. Plants don't really need brains; they borrow ours."<sup>9</sup> As a result, they suggest, "The seedless fruits of flowering plants, like banana and orange trees, have the most remarkable dispersal strategy of all: season after season human growers clone them."<sup>10</sup> This has led some to wonder if human beings exist so bananas can reproduce. It's a funny, if not a humbling question, but there is some truth to it. We have coevolved with plants, and our advanced brain, including the slight consciousness we enjoy as a species, is a direct result of our relationship to plants, which they would only have given us because it presents some reproductive advantage to them. This is what Michael Pollan is getting at when he says;

About ten thousand years ago the world witnessed a second flowering of plant diversity that we would come to call, somewhat self-centeredly, "the invention of agriculture." A group of angiosperms refined their basic put-the-animal-to-work strategy to take advantage of one particular animal that had evolved not only to move freely around the earth, but to think and trade complicated thoughts. These plants hit on a remarkably clever strategy: getting us to move and to think for them. Now came edible grasses (such as wheat and corn) that incited humans to cut down vast forests to make more room for them; flowers whose beauty would transfix whole cultures: plants so compelling and useful and tasty they would inspire human being to see, transport, extol, and even write books about them.<sup>11</sup>

This is the reason, he goes on to say, "it makes just as much sense to think of agriculture as something the grasses did to people as a way to conquer trees."<sup>12</sup> Certainly genes compete with other genes for dominance, which is why creatures compete with other creatures. But my sermon today is not about the grasses' unjust oppression of trees. And although I am greatly disturbed by all that we're doing to

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<sup>8</sup> Narby, Jeremy, *The Cosmic Serpent*, Jeremy Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 1998, p.49.

<sup>9</sup> Margulis & Sagan, *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Pollan, *ibid.*, p. xxi.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

plants today—including cutting down our vital rainforests for meat production and harvesting hard woods; genetically modifying organisms that millions of years of evolution have already perfected to survive in today’s environment, turning them into foods with questionable health benefits; corporations like Monsanto that are using the courts to force farmers to burn their organic seeds, forcing them to buy the company’s patented seeds, season after season, because they have been genetically modified to remain sterile; the use of chemicals, herbicides and pesticides, that literally kill top soil, including the microbes that, after millions of years of evolution, have developed a vital symbiotic relationship with all plants; and the outlawing of plants, like marijuana, peyote, and ayahuasca, that can potentially help our brains take another evolutionary leap forward—my talk today is not about the ways in which we oppress plants, but the ways in which plants oppress us.

Perhaps, I should have just called it, “The Wisdom of Plants,” which is really what it’s about. But the term “oppression” has been a playful way of getting out of our anthropocentric box, to look at the world through the eyes of plants, or, since they don’t have eyes of their own, to let our friends, the plants, borrow ours, just as they borrow everything else from us. In this way, in the spirit of Meister Eckhart, who said, “Every creature is a word of God, and a book about God,” I have endeavored to show the superiority of our plant lords. And if these green gods have shaped and given form to our species, perhaps they specifically engineered us to serve them. The word “human,” after all, means “humility.” indeed, at our best, that is, when we are most humane, most ourselves, we behave as the servants of the Earth we were designed to be, stewards of the Garden of Eden. And if we’re genetically modified by plants to humbly serve the needs of others, what better oppressor to lord over us than our magnificent green partners who effortlessly emulate all the highest aspirations of our own greatest human sages? Sitting still, keeping quiet, standing strong, remaining flexible, selflessness, peacefulness, letting go when the time comes, sharing, stretching, receiving, giving more than you take, doing for others what you would have them do for you, treating your friends and enemies alike, and making the world a more beautiful place. Maybe someday, if we keep following them, just as our ancient animal ancestors followed them from sea to earth, the plant sages will lead us to emulate their ways, that we might allow them, through us, to spread such wisdom, like seeds, throughout the whole world. Until then, I think I’ll remain their humble servant.