

## Plant Thinking as Infrapolitical Ethics

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In this paper, I address the question of an ethics for the Anthropocene in an infrapolitical register. Drawing on Levinas's ethics, I consider the potential place of non-human and non-animal life in the ethical encounter as he describes it. I argue that plant life can be understood as occupying the place of the Other, and then I engage with Michael Marder's *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* to argue that there is an infrapolitical dimension to the 'ethical offshoots' of his work. Plant-thinking converges with both infrapolitics and with Joanna Zylińska's *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene* in its embrace of the bad infinity of infrapolitics and its concomitant refusal to re-ontologize ethics.

In September 2019 during the United Nations Climate Summit, a journalist asked the well-known young activist Greta Thunberg, 'what is your message to world leaders today?' Thunberg began her response simply by saying 'This is all wrong'.<sup>i</sup> What Thunberg refers to by this *all* are the forms of life that pursue overproduction, continuous growth, the forms of life that have contributed to climate change, the sixth extinction, the possible future of a planet unsuitable for human life – in short, the Anthropocene. Thunberg addresses economic and political leaders to make it clear that nothing less than *everything* is wrong, and that, therefore, this everything has to change so that the future that awaits us might possibly be different. As Gareth Williams notes in the exordium of his book

*Infrapolitical Passages: Global Turmoil, Narco-Accumulation, and the Post-Sovereign State*, Thunberg is not the first nor will she be the last person to make these types of claims since, as Williams puts it, 'entire communities around the world have been saying exactly the same thing for decades' (2021: 2) without having the same access that Thunberg has to meetings like those at the United Nations. The question of unequal access to this and other sites of global power is not a trivial matter, although it is not the main question here. What we can recognize is that what Thunberg and other communities are announcing is a true crisis.

'Crisis' is both a term whose analytical value has been weakened and a term that has undergone an important conceptual shift in recent decades. We speak of crises all the time: recurring economic crises, public health crises, mental health crises, democracy in crisis, and a long list of others. Crisis is etymologically linked to what Chilean philosopher Willy Thayer has termed 'the *kríno* constellation' (2020: 8-10), referring to the Greek term from which we derive both 'crisis' and 'critique'. As Thayer describes it, the Greek *kríno* entailed multiple but overlapping meanings that range from the contemplative task of separating or examining to medical, juridical, political, theological and narrative uses of *kríno*, all of which were intended to name some sort of break with a status quo. Crisis would entail two moments, both the opening and the closing of the crisis, such that we would be able to look back to both the causes of the irruption and the mechanisms that allowed it to close. We should note a conceptual shift, however, because crisis no longer refers to a moment that we could isolate as descriptive of a break between a before and an after. Crisis is now, rather, a condition, a protracted state of being that gives no

indication of closing anytime soon – we are always in crisis. This is what Gareth Williams refers to when he writes of post-katechontic decontainment.<sup>ii</sup> Whereas many are familiar with notion of *interregnum* inherited from Gramsci, the condition of permanent crisis in post-katechontic times does not presuppose the eventual closure that *interregnum* necessarily entails with its implicit teleology. It might therefore be tempting to seek a closure, but infrapolitics proposes no such thing. As Williams notes, the task of infrapolitics ‘is no longer to remetaphorize the katechon and therefore metaphysics, but to learn to become attuned to where the perishing of the modern katechon leaves us’ (2020: 73).

The Anthropocene crisis leaves us in a position where we cannot continue to appeal to the same old concepts, and infrapolitics thus proposes a step back not to turn our backs on politics, but rather to become better attuned to the register of existence in post-katechontic times. In other words, the crisis of the Anthropocene is obviously a crisis of the planet, but it is also a crisis of signification since the signifying structures that constitute our ‘world’ will become meaningless in the face of the destruction that we are manufacturing for human and non-human life on the planet.

Within this framework, I turn now to the question of ethics, parting from Emmanuel Levinas’s description of the ethical encounter. I then take this discussion to a consideration of Michael Marder’s *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* to argue that there is an infrapolitical dimension to the ‘ethical offshoots’ of his work.

I should emphasize from the start that Anthropocene ethics in an infrapolitical register will not propose a set of actions or a path to be followed. What is at stake here is not normative ethics but rather what Alberto Moreiras refers to as ‘the region of theoretical practice that solicits the constitutive opacity of the ethicopolitical relation – hence admits, for every practical decision, of no preceding political or ethical light to mark the path’ (2018: 122). On this point I also follow Joanna Zylińska in her collection of essays under the title *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene*.<sup>iii</sup> Zylińska writes that she is among those who are ‘concerned by the humanist limitations of Levinas’s ethics, according to which the primary responsibility exercised upon me always comes from other humans’ (2014: 16), about which I will have more to say in a moment. For now, I want to highlight that I follow Zylińska’s ethics which calls itself post-masculinist as it rejects the ‘masculinist enterprise which knows in advance and once and for all what it is striving for’ (2014: 88). In Zylińska’s ethics, there are no calls for specific actions at the individual level, nor appeals to save the world. Her ‘minimal ethics’ aims not to fall into what she calls ‘the instrumentalism of technical arrangements’ (2014: 72), being more a proposition than a solution. By resisting offering specific actions for individuals, Zylińska responds to what she calls a ‘scalar derangement’ (2014: 27), a position that prompts people to take small actions to somehow save the world. As such, she asserts that ‘post-masculinist rationality remains suspicious towards any current attempts to (re)turn to ontology, in both its idealist and materialist guises, as a predominant mode of philosophizing. It sees any such attempts for what they are: ways of producing and hence also mastering “the world” and then passing it on (as fact) to others’ (2014: 15).

Zylinska draws, in part, on Levinas's description of ethics as first philosophy in which he narrates the phenomenological experience of an encounter with an Other. When Levinas writes about the relationship with the Other, he means something specific. It is not a simple binary in which self and other stand in a relationship of recognition characterized by some kind of fundamental equality, it is rather a relationship of total and complete asymmetry. His word for this is alterity. In *Totality and Infinity*, he writes that the other 'is other as an alterity that is not formal, with an alterity that is not a simple reversal of identity' (1979: 62). Rather, for Levinas, alterity is the word for something that cannot be reduced to a symmetrical subject/object relationship. In fact, he goes so far as to say that the Other is so other than me that 'the collectivity in which I say "you" or "we" is not a plural of "I." I, you, are not individuals of a common concept' (1979: 63).

To describe this experience of encounter with the radically different, Levinas uses the theme of the face. For Levinas, the encounter with the Other through the face reveals a radical vulnerability, characterizing the face of the other in 'Peace and Proximity' by its 'defenseless exposure' (1999: 148). In Levinas's terms, this ethical relationship with the Other is absolute, characterized by an unlimited responsibility from which we are never exempt. This is how Levinas positions ethics as first philosophy – the ethical moment allegorized in the face-to-face experience has, for Levinas, universal scope. This ethical obligation is not contingent, but rather positioned as something outside of history and before politics.

At least one potential problem emerges when thinking Levinasian ethics in Anthropocene times. Among other things, the Anthropocene demands that we reconsider the privileged place of the human in our thinking. This is not necessarily brand new – thinkers have long pushed us to reconsider this and related issues – but it is given a renewed urgency in Anthropocene times, as some of the other papers in this dossier attest to. The problem with thinking Levinasian ethics in these contexts is that, although the face for Levinas is not literally a human face, at first glance his conception of what ‘the face’ is might seem to be restricted to humans. It would be said, for example, that for Levinas plants and animals do not have a face. But within Levinas’s body of work, there is ambiguity on this question. In a 1986 interview with students at the University of Warwick, he was asked directly if there was anything in his ethics that fundamentally distinguishes between humans and animals. In this interview, Levinas responds that, although he does give priority to the human, one cannot completely reject the face of an animal. He immediately qualifies this, suggesting that perhaps a snake does not have a face, but that a dog does. One might object at this point that the line Levinas is drawing here is really about the dog’s social and cultural proximity to humans, a proximity that would not characterize a human-snake relationship. However, we can at least recognize that, for Levinas, while the status of animals is not his priority, there are at least some indications that it would be possible to include the animal, even if in a limited way and always in the background.<sup>iv</sup>

While Zylinska’s *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene* does express concern for the perceived ‘humanist limitations of Levinas’s ethics’ stated above, Zylinska also engages critically with this perception in order to ultimately suggest

that 'Levinas' ethics (...) can be seen as a *par excellence* ethical framework for the Anthropocene because it makes me face up to the question of extinction across different scales' (2014:63). Zylinska's nuanced reading of Levinas's ethics therefore recognizes a potential limit while also finding an opening for thought by '[borrowing] its minimalist structuring from his thinking of the edifice of Western philosophy' (2014: 95). In another important text, *The End of Man: A Feminist Counterapocalypse*, Zylinska suggests that Levinas's ethics 'lends itself to a posthumanist opening because it poses a radical challenge to the self-sufficient and self-centered subject of moral theory' (2018: 57). So while Zylinska is correct to note Levinas's 'marked (even if historically comprehensible, given the context of the Shoah) disinterestedness in other nonhuman forms of being and becoming' (2014: 95), we can push Levinas's thinking at this limit since, if the Other is characterized by its absolute otherness, it is not difficult to imagine how non-human and non-animal life could fit into this conception. Plants, for example, in their absolute difference from humans, confront us precisely in a defenseless exposure that could be understood as a horticultural Dasein. Indeed, plants would perhaps be the example *par excellence* of what Levinas describes when he uses that enigmatic phrase in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 'a passivity more passive than all passivity' (1991: 15), since plants embody an absolute otherness in relation to an exteriority that they do not dominate.

This is, in part, what Michael Marder argues in his book *Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. Marder starts from the fact that, despite the general marginalization of non-human living beings such as animals in the history of philosophy, recent philosophy is generating more and

more discussion on these questions. At the same time, there are non-human and non-animal living beings (plants) that have received much less attention. According to Marder, this is because, although they are living beings, we do not recognize in plants the same resemblance to us as animals, causing philosophy to have negatively judged their value. Marder finds the beginning of this philosophical marginalization in the four types of movement that Aristotle elaborates in *De Anima*: that plants can alter their state, they can grow and decrease, but they cannot alter their position (1976: 243-244). Marder criticizes this notion because plant life simply moves at a speed and rhythm that in most cases is too subtle for our cognitive and perceptual apparatuses but that scientific advances have allowed us to observe. In other words, Aristotle sees in plants an essential lack that Marder does not accept.

The question Marder asks, then, is how is it possible to have an encounter with plants? And how can we understand plant otherness without fetishizing it? For Marder, if plants embody absolute alterity in relation to an exteriority that they do not dominate, perhaps the only term that can characterize this intersection of the two worlds, that of human Dasein and horticultural Dasein, would be the Portuguese word *desencontro* (2013: 12). The idea is not, then, to propose that plants have an ethical responsibility equal to humans through some kind of active agency like the biblical command 'thou shalt not kill' which, for Levinas, arises in the encounter with the human Other. While we reject the lack that Aristotle attributes to plants, here we can recognize an important type of lack – we are not attributing to plants an ethical responsibility. To suggest this would amount to measuring plants and other beings against humans and comparing

the extent to which they can or cannot replicate or imitate human behavior. Suggesting this might also simultaneously have the effect of bestowing upon plants a sort of redemptive function, positioning them as an ideal to which *we* might aspire. Neither of these is what is at stake with an infrapolitical Anthropocene ethics. Rather, what emerges from Levinas's ethics with respect to non-human living beings has to recognize their alterity precisely as an other coming to presence, letting the Other present itself to us without appropriating it or abrogating its radical alterity. This is what Donna Haraway means when she writes of 'staying with the trouble' which 'requires making oddkin' (2016: 4). Or to use Derridean language, although it is true that we cannot totally escape our narcissistic anthropocentrism, we must make every effort to pursue an 'economy of a narcissism much more welcoming, hospitable, much more open to the experience of the other' (1995: 199).

In a certain sense, this is not so radical of an ask. We are made both of others and of the planet, of the earth. Not only are we in each other's bodies (we all breathe the same air, as the Covid-19 pandemic has forcefully reminded us), but we are also made of the earth and organic matter. Following Haraway, our kin relationships extend beyond the human to all sorts of other life forms, making kin truly a 'wild category' in spite of the fact that 'all sorts of people do their best to domesticate [it]' (2016: 2). We could therefore also think of our entanglement with non-human living beings as a community of those who have nothing in common, to use Alphonso Lingis's phrase. In the introductory pages to his 1994 book, Lingis asks whether or not there is 'a growing conviction, clearer today among innumerable people, that the dying of people with whom we have nothing in common (...)

concerns us?’ His consideration of this question leads him to assert that ‘what concerns us in another is precisely his or her otherness (...)’ (1994: x). Would we not say the same of our relationship to plant life in the Anthropocene? Are we not, today, moved by the same ‘growing conviction, clearer today among innumerable people’ that humanity’s transformation of the planet into mere standing reserve with deadly consequences for non-human and non-animal life concerns us? And does this conviction not emerge, following Michael Marder, precisely from the otherness of plant life?

In the final section of his book, Marder presents a list of ten so-called ‘ethical offshoots of plant-thinking’. In at least one respect, some of the ethical offshoots that he proposes are rather unsatisfying. For example, Marder’s fifth ethical offshoot is to ‘respect the time of plants’ (2013: 183). This ultimately amounts to little more than the ‘eat local’ movement – exhortations to shop at your farmer’s market, or to eat certain fruits and vegetables only when they are in season. We can be honest, there is nothing wrong with doing these things; who would be against these types of micro-political actions?<sup>v</sup> At the same time, these types of calls to action are not only often the privilege of certain sectors of society, but also when considered against the massive scale of industrial agricultural systems, micro-efforts like these seem better poised simply to assuage the egos of consumers.

So, while the fifth ethical offshoot of plant-thinking is only minimally inspiring, at least two of the other ethical offshoots proposed by Marder are quite good, and I suggest that they are infrapolitical. The third offshoot, for example, notes that ‘vegetal life deserves respect’ (2013: 182) and Marder writes that this is because vegetal life

‘embodies the an-archic principle of living’ (182). This is not the political anarchism of Kropotkin, Bakunin, Proudhon, et al, but rather a without-why, a current of thought present in Reiner Schürmann. It is a refusal to set forth a guiding moral or political principle – replacing one *archē* for another – but rather a mode of existence attuned to what Gareth Williams has diagnosed as the epoch of post-katechontic decontainment. Marder’s tenth ethical offshoot then goes further by noting that ‘the essential incompleteness of vegetal life conditions the growth of plant-thinking and ethical action’ (187). This is a thinking that ‘will not freeze in a doctrinaire form’ and ‘exceed[s] the scope of a program of action, or of a fixed set of normative de-contextualized guidelines’ (187-188). This ethical offshoot embraces the bad infinity of infrapolitics in that it does not re-ontologize ethics, but rather is ‘an ethics singularly adapted to each situation, rid of final conclusions (...)’ (187).

This plant-thinking ultimately re-issues the Levinasian call to respect the uniqueness of others and abandon the masculinist presumption by which we claim to be in charge of everything, a presumption that has given us permission to put everything including plant life at our disposal and instrumentalize the entire planet. This ultimately implies a fundamental shift in our relationship with the world, that we cease seeing the planet as a mere standing reserve. If we accept Greta Thunberg’s claim that ‘this is all wrong’, we need a project of thought at the scale proposed by infrapolitics to rise to the occasion. While it may be true that infrapolitics has exhibited a general reluctance to talk about ethics in a normative sense (something it shares with Zylińska’s *Minimal Ethics*), there is an implicit ethical injunction in what Moreiras has sometimes called ‘dirty atopianism’, ‘a nonprogrammable program of thinking

that refuses to find satisfaction in expropriation at the same time it refuses to fall into appropriative drives' (2001: 23). To the extent that this injunction issues a task, the refusal of expropriation in favor of respecting the secret of the other which is housed in its alterity calls not for a blanket, normative call to do this or that, but rather confronts us with the never-ending task of *reading*, a task which does not rush to a specific and predetermined politics while remaining open to a politics to come. This would be a task that recognizes the alterity of the non-human Other and refuses to plunge it into a chain of general equivalence, instead allowing it to present itself to us, even if in a way that exceeds our full comprehension.<sup>vi</sup> This is the convergence between infrapolitics, minimal ethics, and plant-thinking: an Anthropocene ethics which respects the excess of the Other while not re-ontologizing ethics, a decidedly post-masculinist ethics which allows for an opening to that which cannot be named in advance. It is this excess that plant-thinking holds to, an excess analogous to what infrapolitics posits as that region of experience that cannot be wholly captured by subjectivity or politics but that points to a horizon beyond exhaustive calculability.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/23/763452863/transcript-greta-thunbergs-speech-at-the-u-n-climate-action-summit>

<sup>ii</sup> ‘Katechon’ is a term employed by early Christianity to signal a sort of restrainer, that which served to obstruct the coming of the Anti-Christ. The term is later used by a range of political thinkers to theorize the modern nation after Hobbes. The most well-known commentator on the katechon in the political sphere is Carl Schmitt, although others have written on related matters including Julia Hell, Massimo Cacciari, and Paolo Virno. For more on this, see *Infrapolitical Passages*, especially pp. 54-74.

<sup>iii</sup> A brief note is warranted here since Zylinzka makes explicit her interest in brevity: ‘the aim here is to say *just enough*’ (2014: 22, emphasis in the original). She advises the reader that each of her ten short essays can be read in succession or on their own. Reading the essays ‘out of order’ would offer the reader the experience of entering ethics *in media res*, an experience that Zylinska suggests ‘can actually serve as a description of the location of our minimal ethics’ (2014: 23).

<sup>iv</sup> For a productive take on this and related matters, see Emily McAvan’s recent contribution to *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*. Writing on the 2019-2020 Australian wildfires, McAvan engages with both Levinasian ethics and Judith Butler’s notion of grievable life to suggest that some animals are granted ethical status but ‘only by their proximity to humanness’ (2023: 23). McAvan insists, however, that ‘animals *do* have a face in the sense that Levinas has given us’ (2023: 24, emphasis in the original).

<sup>v</sup> These types of actions could be considered infrapolitical in the sense that James Scott has used the term, although Scott’s usage is not the same as the infrapolitics under consideration in this special issue.

<sup>vi</sup> For an excellent analysis of related questions, see part two of Erin Graff-Zivin’s *Anarchaeologies: Reading as Misreading*, ‘The Ethical Turn’, especially the final section ‘Undecidable Ethics’ on pp. 69-74.