

review of Andrew F. Smith, **A Critique of the Moral Defense of Vegetarianism** (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)

Life must feed but it need not feed on the living: in principle. In Earthly practice, both animals and plants, vegans and omnivores, are participant in a great cycle of consumption where each is finally food for the other. Ethical vegetarianism is thus inconsistent, perhaps impossible. It abjures feeding upon the sentient, and animals are sentient; but plants, and therefore the vegetarians who eat them, eat animals, ultimately.

You might quickly think, as I did after coming upon Smith's argument in Maclean's magazine, that he argues at a strawman. For the Ethical Vegetarian is against not the ingestion of animals (or their decomposed chemical descendants) but rather the control & killing of animals for ingestion. An ethical vegetarian could, with moral consistency, eat an animal who had died 'naturally'. My vegan friend, who runs a microsantuario, may eat the eggs of hen rescued from laying shed, I think.

Could they, however, eat the remains of a doe a wolf had nibbled at, then abandoned? Could they eat the poor mouse the cat dragged in? The doe and mouse were procured through violence, too much like the New Zealand lamb to be ethically edible. Yet many of the animals whose breakdown made the soil that our carrots feed on, died, like doe and mouse, violently. Indeed I placed 'naturally' in scarequotes above because the term hides the messy reality that all animal death is in a sense violent: from the mouse in cat's jaw to the slow-motion ravaging of cancer. We all ingest, 'as parasites on soil' [to use Norman Rush's epithet in Mating] from a system that involves much violence & suffering.

By 'the transitivity of eating', Smith concludes that (a) herbivores ultimately eat animals; but it also seems to imply that (b) humans ultimately eat humans. For humans become soil for corn, too. From (a) Smith concludes that the vegetarian is hypocritical for criticizing omnivores; yet he does not likewise conclude from (b) that we're all hypocritical for objecting to cannibals. He admires the animists who've long recognized and honoured the Great Transitivity that ultimately implies self-ingestion. But why not go further and allow, if not admire, the (direct) cannibals? Smith does not address this reduction to cannibalism; which is a reduction to absurdity only if we accept that humans are morally off-limits as a direct food source. Without argument from Smith as to why humans should be so excepted, he stops the reductio by a widely shared, anthropocentric presumption.

Ethical Vegetarianism faces its own reduction, in the other direction: to the wrongness of eating plants, and thus to the apparent wrongness of any viable human diet. Traditional 'sentientists' [e.g. Regan, Singer] deny the reduction by denying plant sentience; but, Smith argues, we have reason to include the botanic within the circle of sentience. He surveys recent work in Plant Neurobiology, a field he concedes is controversial but "not a fringe science"; and further appeals to the long testimony of animist cultures who find an ecosystem richly peopled well into the botanic.

The BioSci Evidence for Plant Sentience

The accumulating morphologic and behavioural signs ought to trouble any committed vegetarian / vegan. (I'll henceforth simplify to **V-an.**) They can't be ignored, e.g. dismissed as a tactic to disrupt the animalist movement. Defenders of animals must avoid rehearsing, now against the flora, the too-easy dismissals of subjectivity that Cartesian exploiters of animals have long used.

You may finish Smith's second chapter unconvinced by the science thus far; I, for one, am convinced that "a shift in the burden of proof is overdue." [29] However, he mounts his case in a way that is often frustrating, oddly question-begging.

The only difference between taste and smell is that the former is dependent on solubles (by dissolution or liquefaction) while the latter depends on volatiles (on the inhalation of gases). Plants sense and respond to volatiles in the air and to solubles on their bodies. So they smell and taste. [18]

Tasting and smelling are similar. But there's difference between (1)tasting or smelling, and (2)responding to volatiles/solubles. (2) does not entail phenomenology, while tasting and smelling do, are experiences. As experiences, they resist Smith's particle-reductionism. Or there's much Phil of Mind that Smith must perform here to convince.

Here is Smith summarizing the work of Marder: "Memories are thus inscribed in the bodies of plants rather than actualized in subjective consciousness" [25]. If so, a serious concession to the Sentientists. Marder also concludes that plant intentionality "may be understood as the movement of growth, directed toward optimal patches of nutrient-rich soil and sources of light". [26] Marder doesn't say, note, that this movement indicates a subjective intentionality, a will capable of felt frustration. This movement is the intentionality.

Here is Smith countering plant scientist Chamovitz, who denies plant pain-qualia:

The experience of an ouch seems unnecessary, in any case, to grant plants moral standing according to sentientists' own standards. If sentientists acknowledge that other-than-human animals need not suffer exactly like humans do to be granted moral standing, the same surely must hold for plants—so long as they too qualify as sentient [20]

Sentientists need not claim that animals suffer just like humans. They do claim that they suffer. But if plants don't suffer anything like an ouch - if there's nothing unpleasant the acacia feels when releasing tannin to defend itself from gnawing animal - then the Sentientists are not inconsistent in denying plants moral standing.

Again, contra Chamovitz, Smith asks why plants are “rendered unconscious by the same anesthetics that work on animals”. [19] Is Smith here presupposing the plants were conscious prior to said rendering? Not quite. In a footnote he approvingly quotes Marder’s observation of a sleep/wake cycle: “Anyone who has seen the time-lapse footage contrasting plant movements in the light and in the dark is struck by the difference between their purpose-oriented waking movements and the dreamy and somewhat chaotic vacillations at night”. [132] Yet we need more than this to infer subjective awareness. Smith often evades the hard question of consciousness: “Perhaps plants are not conscious in the sense of having something like subjective awareness of themselves experiencing the world, but they certainly can be awake and aware of the world around them.” Who is Smith responding to here, who demands that plants have meta-consciousness - an abstracted awareness of awareness that e.g. phenomenologists practise upon themselves? The live concern, for Sentientists, is that what seems like “being aware of the world around them” could be mere action: which, if we’re conservative, is all that Marder’s observation establishes.

Smith acknowledges that the question of whether plants feel pain “is critical for assessing whether plants are sentient.” [18] Yet he constructs a false dichotomy when insisting that “while we cannot say that an ouch has occurred, it is not at all clear that we need to in order to establish that plants take definitive steps to respond to actual and potential dangers.” [19] It is false because our actual choice isn’t between either (i) plants who feel nothing and are unresponsive to their environment; or (ii) plants who feel pain and are responsive. There’s the third option of plants who have no pain qualia but are responsive.

If we define self-awareness, as Smith does quoting DeGrazia, as “the ability to distinguish one’s own body from the rest of the environment” [22-23] then aren’t single cells or an estate perimetered in tripwire alarm self-aware? If we associate sentience with intelligence, and accept Stefano Mancuso's definition of intelligence as the ability to solve problems, then what other than plants and animals have it? Even if we compound Mancuso's definition with Stenhouse's “adaptively variable behaviour over a lifetime” [23], it's not clear we have a criterion to stop predictable reductios to thermostats and search engines.

It's that the plant is at all responsive to stimuli, releasing defensive chemicals at the sound of munching caterpillar, that often shocks Smith from his V-an complacency. But many in Smith’s intended audience have long-accepted such receptivities, finding them far from indicative of sentience. The conclusions Smith returns us from his “head-first dive” into the scientific literature are so often not quite the ones he'd promised, and the very scientists he relies on often belie him.

Yet so many plant behaviours and forms are suggestive of an inner life; we must by these external signs make the case for consciousness of any other than our personal own. An implication, by this method, that search engines & Xbox enemy A.I. are conscious will seem less an absurdity and more an important result, as our A.I. begin passing Turing Tests.

Smith's evidence is relevant, but is it, in its accumulation, sufficient? I've focused here on my gripes; but find myself conceding by chapter's close that, given the great stakes involved for the plants, we ought to give them the benefit of our doubt: this is the same 'precautionary principle' [15] that sentientists warn with.

Expansionary Sentientism

Sentientism is, by Smith's use, the view that sentience is what matters, morally, and that only animals have it. Expansionary Sentientism (ES) may in practice prioritize animal consciousness, by maintaining a prohibition on meat, but

Unlike sentientists, expansionary sentientists exhibit no compunction to ignore the intimacy of our relatedness to plants or deemphasize plants' capacities "in order that human beings might pretend that their lives can operate without harming the integrity of other beings" [he here quotes M. Hall, [Plants As Persons](#), 2011]. Acknowledging this does not give moral agents license to harm plants unnecessarily or kill them indiscriminately. Instead, it should make us receptive to the fact that killing is part of living [Jensen, [A Language Older Than Words](#), 2000]; nutritional exchange is a necessary condition for ecological health.[36]

ES would minimize harm to plants, likely requiring the end of conventional agriculture. ES would prefer fruitarianism, if it were viable, but concedes that our care for plants is limited by our "colliding agendas" [Hall], that we must, to survive, sometimes violate them.

Smith ultimately rejects both Sentientism and ES for being 'expansionary', differing primarily in where they draw the line. Both versions place humans at the center, granting other beings value insofar as they are similar to us, the standard.

But ES at its best - and Smith should be focused on its strongest version - would presume no power to confer value on non-humans. More modestly it would only recognize those beings who already have value, by their sentience. Also, that the being is like humans in possessing sentience is not essential. Likeness may influence our order of discovery, the expanding recognition from self across similarity space onto animals, plants, and what else; but likeness per se is not a criterion of sentience, for ES. The recognized being's sentience need not be much like our own.

In textual practice ES may sometimes speak with the arrogant prerogative of a value-bestower. But to dismiss ES because of this contingency is to commit something like the strawman Smith vowed in the book's opening pages to avoid. He rejects ES, ultimately, on the worry that it "can lead us to harm others by overlooking needs and interests that diverge too greatly from ours." [41] But this seems a risk that infects all relations with others; a risk owing more directly to the fact that there are others.

Animism & the Cannibalism Reductio

ES doesn't extend far enough, so is inconsistent. Given plant sentience, singling out meat for abstention becomes morally suspect. Moreover, plants use animals, in part by consuming their broken down bodies in the soil. So, by 'the transitivity of eating' (henceforth TE: If B eats C, and A eats B, then A also eats C) the V-an can't avoid eating animals.

TE is no rhetoric trick; and the evidence for plant sentience is not so recent and controversial as Chapter Two's survey would imply. Both are acknowledged in the long experience of animists, who find sentience, or something closely correlate, in all that lives, and deep interdependence. A great advantage of the animist worldview over ES is it does not presume that being eaten is a moral degradation; and it doesn't (impossibly, by TE) try to exempt a special class of beings from being eaten. We too will be eaten, become soil for the plants. The ecosystem is an unavoidable heterarchy.

But it must be asked, and pressed: why are humans off-limits as a direct foodsource? The animist, Plumwood's 'sacred eater', for all their immersion in the give-and-take of life, exempt their own narrow kind from being killed and directly eaten. We're all omnivores, by TE; but the animist is a pseudo-omnivore in their range of what they'll directly kill & consume.

Smith never really countenances the moral possibility of cannibalism. I'll presume that neither do the tribes he anthropologizes and admires; that he'd not admire them if they did hunt humans. But a proscription of anthropophagy seems deeply anthropocentric. The animists allow their bodies to become soil, eventually, but are not fit subjects of the hunt or harvest. Smith would not accuse the animists of an arrogant abdication from the cycle of eater-eaten for their proscription. So why accuse V-ans of such arrogance, of making an "ontologically arbitrary and kingdomist" distinction [72] when they extend that proscription to our animal siblings?

He concedes V-ism is not simply a food fad. It's worse: symptom of an ecocidal culture that has lost connection with the animating consciousness that infuses all life, surges up from the landbase into plant and animal alike. He suspects that V-ism has become "something of a stand-in" for a food culture that would truly connect us with the landbase and the many forms of consciousness that arise from it. [115] But the V-an ultimately is captured by their Dominator Culture's ecologic alienation.

He rejects the term 'omnivore' as applied to the indigenous animists, as an artifact of our own disconnectedness. The distinction between V-an and omnivore is made by a people who presume they can extract even partially from the ecologic heterarchy. By TE, he argues, avoiding omnivorism - including indirect cannibalism - is ultimately futile. Yet this does not render the proscription of direct cannibalism futile and meaningless. TE turns a fallacious equivocation, when we slide too easily between direct & indirect forms of eating, and between intentional &

unintentional consumption. Both Smith and the Anishinaabe would agree on a moral difference between intentionally killing a human to consume their flesh, and ingesting their ancestor's molecular vestiges in the corn. It's more than the difference between "the last strand in the food web leading to our mouths and all strands that came before." [72]

Given plant sentience, if truly a sentience that can suffer, the V-an is inconsistent in their protection. But the pseudo-omnivore who recoils in horror from the prospect of hunting humans is inconsistent too; and more limited, in their direct kinship circle. Here is Smith acknowledging Rod Preece's critique of the Lakota 'relational hunt':

it is deeply misleading to depict one's prey as a brother. No one in their right mind would engage with their immediate relations as the hunter does with the deer. [49]

Smith plausibly speculates the Lakota's response to Preece: the Hunt is part of "a longstanding agreement between hunters and hunted that has played an integral role in facilitating the health and well-being of both parties." [49] I do not doubt the possibility of such a general agreement. Even individual animal may consent. During dialogue [December 2015] on the Short Hills Deer Hunt in Niagara, Warren, an Anishinaabe elder, impressed me with his account of the ideal hunter, who waits in his attunement for permission from the animal he stalks. Who awaits crack of tree and downward lean before felling. I do worry that relations of domination are so often rationalized into mutualities, e.g. predatory capitalism and its rationale of 'development' & free trade, of bringing the global poor into the circle of prosperity. I also wonder if we ought to give to deer the benefit of any doubt we have about the Hunt's purported mutuality. By its sometimes ambiguous behavioural signs, Smith gives the benefit of doubt to the Plant, in judging it sentient, because the stakes for the plant are so high. But the powerful resistance of hunted animal, her total commitment to flight and defense, her suffering - this is hardly ambiguous. How often is the ideal that Warren described in fact realized?

Perhaps direct cannibalism shows disrespect for the natural order of species relations, "the fundamental predator/prey relationship" that Derrick Jensen commands us to "honor and keep and participate in." This fundamental relationship is between species, Jensen might expand, marking some as prey for others, their natural predators. To hunt the deer is to honour this relation; to hunt humans is to violate it.

Does nature's own design proscribe predation upon one's kind? It happens, has been documented in hundreds of species including our own. Should we consider this an aberration? If eating your own kind is impermissible, why, given animism's deep unities, should 'own kind' be strictly intra-species? Why not interpret 'own kind' to mean all mammals, all who are mobile, who have mothers, who live? A prohibition of direct cannibalism opens into its own expanding circle.

A final response to the prospect of a pre-existent ecologic arrangement between hunter and hunted. Consider (with forgiveness) the powerful alien carnivores who would harvest us seasonally while cognizant of our intrinsic value, honouring our mutuality in the great galaxial

circle of life. We would, in practice, fight so being honoured, deny we'd ever agreed to this, defend our children from them with all our somatic and moralist rage; just as do the animal mothers Derrick Jensen so admires and learns from: whom he considers a possible model of eco activism [in his Introduction to Pacifism as Pathology by Ward Churchill, 2007]. We would, in practice, fight (I hope), not acquiesce in the naturalness of the relation. Moreover, we would consider ourselves wronged by them. Moreover, we'd be right, I think - if anything is wrong. If we'd agreed to be hunted, from some wider purview, I hope, down here, we'd retract and dishonour the arrangement.

I suppose I'd concede as follows to Jensen/Smith. We should honour the prey-predator relation: as prey, we honour it by fighting it, not just individual predators in ad hoc acts of desperate self-defense, but by overturning the whole relation, and by taking other prey, in political solidarity, into our circle of protection.

Jensen's Tree & Utopianism

V-ism has a utopian trajectory. Which Smith repeatedly warns against:

Each and every living being is a natural-born killer and natural-born food. . . .[W]e all evolved to be eaten as well as to eat. It can be no other way. [12]

The animal or plant who we eat is itself constituted through the landbase by the flesh of both animals and plants—as well as fungi, insects, prokaryotes, and a staggering array of the earth's minerals. We are all so constituted, every single one of us. Once again, it can be no other way. [72]

The animist had an answer all along, it seems, like Smith's maternal grandma whose presence he senses in his beloved Schuylkill river, patiently awaiting his return. He'd always hid his V-ism from her, but sees now that "I had much more to learn than she did." [xii]

The question of plant sentience seems crucial. TE less so, given a Permission criterion. For while no being has signed over use of their body-soil for future generations, few would be against it, I think. What are the options for someone who affirms plant sentience and is committed to the principle of non-maleficence? Suicide, breatharianism, inedia, fruitarianism, and a utopian reworking of our ecosystem. The first, he confesses, he has seriously considered, when taking our ecocidal presence into depressing account. Breatharianism and inedia he passes over, but what about some fusing of the final two? A future Eden, achieved, not given? He briefly mentions concerns about the dietary viability of the fruitarian diet (which includes pulses, nuts and, arguably, seeds) and reaffirms the necessity of life feeding on life. He advocates a compromise: a provisional V-ism [local landbase willing], with minimal harm to the plants consumed; yet always open to a direct consumption of animals:

If Fairlie is right, then we may not have the luxury to abstain from using, and perhaps even eating, other-than-human animals. Our landbase may dictate it. Without the ability to rely on a global economy to fulfill the demands of our dietary proclivities, we may have to reshape these proclivities if we are to attend to the health and well-being of our landbase. Simply put, our utter reliance on our landbase will become increasingly hard for us to ignore in the years and decades to come. So the conditions for peaceable living favored by vegetarians may not be suitable to surviving, let alone thriving. [124]

As he struggles admirably to work out a viable V-ism, he does reveal there is much to eat without direct killing. There's fruit given off, scissored leaf and even harvested root at the end of the plant's life cycle. If we accept the fruits of the City itself, not just the vertical, soilless gardens he expresses qualified enthusiasm for, but the City as enlightened laboratory, there are foods to be made from molecule up, without coerced input of sentient being. There's food in the sunlight, freely given, and mineral harnessed more directly for metabolism. These future feedings could honour, if we're careful, the requirement of non-maleficence, and need not alienate us from the deeper matrix. Utopia need not be the 'no place' he warns of, that "connotes disconnection or dislocation." [56] Its place may be our future landbase, evolved away from killing. Consciously evolved, by asymptotic approach, not by imposition but in dialogue all the way with all inhabitants.

Or perhaps we alienate for good reason. Nature is where the violence we abhor in our better laws is normalized, required for survival. The V-an seeks ahimsic consumption, which some may call anti-natural; but given nature's own crimes this is no automatic defect. V-ism does point toward the radically re-imagined world we find in Isaiah, or in the transhumanism of David Pearce. It is not completed by simple abjuration of animal flesh. Vegans now ask: Is palm oil vegan? Is paper vegan? Are high-rises vegan?

I honour the City, at its best, which draws a line about its blessed inhabitants and says These you may not kill, you may not use against their will. I like that the City has pets, imperfect but a sign we want more than our own narrow kind in that citadel. A citadel, yes, from some natural, violent realities. Yet it's natural, too, to protect your own, and good to extend your kinship.

The animist too, has transformed nature by goodwill and profound attention to the perfectibility of every act, every relation, no matter how prima facie awful. The domination of eaten by eater is by deeper perception redeemed in an exchange of Equals. Often by appeal to a kind of transcendence, note, at least in its mythic remembrance: to a primeval Negotiation, prior to the fray, where consent was given by all.

Given our inevitable unity with nature, is ecocide an outcome of tendencies in nature herself? Perhaps we extend, exaggerate her consumption. We become nature's shadow-side, bring to crisis & clarity the dominating impulse seen in every elk brought down. We show that Universal Wolf who "Must make perforce a universal prey / And last eat up himself". [Troilus and Cressida, I.III]

A tree told Jensen "You're an animal, you consume, get over it." McKenna might respond, as he did to the Mushroom: "Well, that's your opinion." Duly noted, but we need not acquiesce. If we're truly in dialogue, we'll consider the Tree's advice with care. And continue to query the range intended by Thou shalt not kill: both the Thou, and the kill.

Who is this tree that speaks so glibly, insists we align with the current killing Order? Consider again: the tree insists that we consume; but not that we consume the live & unwilling. The tree may speak twice: by branching tongue, offer two paths. As Smith reads it, 'get over it' means 'give in to it', quit trying to change it. On second reading, a joke we get, 'get over it' means transcend it: find your way out. "You're an animal, mobile", the tree impresses. You're not, in your freedom, bound to this order where life feeds on life. We got off to a troubling start - eating each other - but need not persist.

If, on the other hand, we must accept that life consumes life, we must accept ecocide, in principle. Relative to a larger ecology, our Earth may be a vital node, ripe for hunt or harvest. For us it would be an apocalypse. Its direct causes might all be accounted internally, be anthropogenic in many cases - but these may be the local means some larger Being feeds by.

We'd rightly think that Being demonic. We'd defend our Earth, we'd respect this particular predation relation by fighting back until the whole exploitive order was remade, renegotiated.

Nature perhaps is an animal too. And animals above all move, can end up somewhere else.

Allow me now to consolidate shamanic data with Jensen. A tree once spoke to me, too. It didn't use words - Jensen's didn't either, perhaps - but did communicate in power. It spoke of movement, showed ascent.

we'd wandered thru exurban backyard, blackwood, then of a sudden high clearing. the turf was spongy, aerated with pencil-sized holes, steaming and green in the moonlight. on a slight incline loomed no placid birdhome or naturalized Christmas tree but an inscrutable sovereign, ablaze in a crackling aura. footlights launched fractal shade against starlight, of tiered boughs aslant from totem trunk: at that angle arms of boys assume when feigning a jetplane, the slightly spanning arms of an underused outfielder — his legs astride, to receive Earth's power— and fifteen, twenty, receding chevrons, tracers of a skyward trajectory.

My choice of 'inscrutable' shows I'm unfit to receive, perhaps. An urbanist's brief eruption of forest-animism will of course speak of alienation. And this was the edge of a golf course, I later determined. Perhaps the tree sought release. Or confirmed the indigenous animists: without moving, it achieved what appeared to me as transcendence. A cosmic value Freya Matthews locates in "an inner dimension of matter itself".

The Totem

Andrew Smith is an ideal V-an: willing to follow the argument into its greatest perplexities; to think his position even into collapse; yet unwilling to resume eating animals. He comes to his perplexities in part by recognizing, from within a culture largely hostile to the sacred, his own everyday experience of a "world abuzz with the fire of life and shot through with deep connections both seen and unseen." [51] His unwillingness to eat animals he'd likely explain by a qualified ecologic V-ism whereby the diet "is not universally justifiable" but may be the best option in urban settings. [42] I wonder if he'd also appeal to anything like the totemic relation he explores in Chapter Five. The totem relation creates responsibilities, and rights - "most notably the right to protect one's totem from harm." [117] Can the whole animal kingdom become one's totem animal? I grow unfond of describing myself as vegan, though my diet technically is. I prefer saying I'm an animal lover, allowing in the favouritism that love demands. Even within the animal realm, it's the rabbits and rats I'm most concerned with. My practice is decreasingly sustained by argument, but nor can it be argued away.

I wonder if all Earth-life might become our protected totem. The fully-expanded sentientist steps between feeder and fed upon, disrupts the deep order and demands that we find a different way. This is perhaps getting carried away. Yet all life cries for exemption from being killed.

Paul Bali
Dept of Philosophy
Ryerson University