

**Posthumanism: An Introduction**  
**Professor Pramod K. Nayar**  
**Department of English**  
**The University of Hyderabad**  
**Lecture 19**  
**Lec 19 : The Question of the Nonhuman II**

Thank you. Hi everybody, this is Pramod Kinnar from the Department of English at the University of Hyderabad. And here we continue our exploration of the non-human as a major theme within critical posthumanism and posthumanism's emphasis on, say, plants and vegetal life, but also animals and other forms. Animals have received considerable attention as being located at the periphery of human thought. But plants, as Michael Marder would say in his wonderful work on vegetal life and plant humanities, are at the margin of the margin.

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The Question of the Nonhuman II  
Plants and Vegetal Life

In discussions of the nonhuman, while animals have received considerable attention for being at the periphery of human thought, plants are at 'the margin of the margin' (Michael Marder).

Some note the tradition of Western thought, from Aristotle downwards, about 'vegetal/vegetable soul'.

Critical Plant Studies is an interdisciplinary field that examines the relationship between plants and humans, and the cultural meanings of plants.

'Plant thinking refers to moving agency away from the human and towards vegetal life, which is the backbone of all ecosystems. It is an acknowledgement that discounting plant life is a grave ecological and philosophical error'.

Baylee Brits and Prudence Gibson

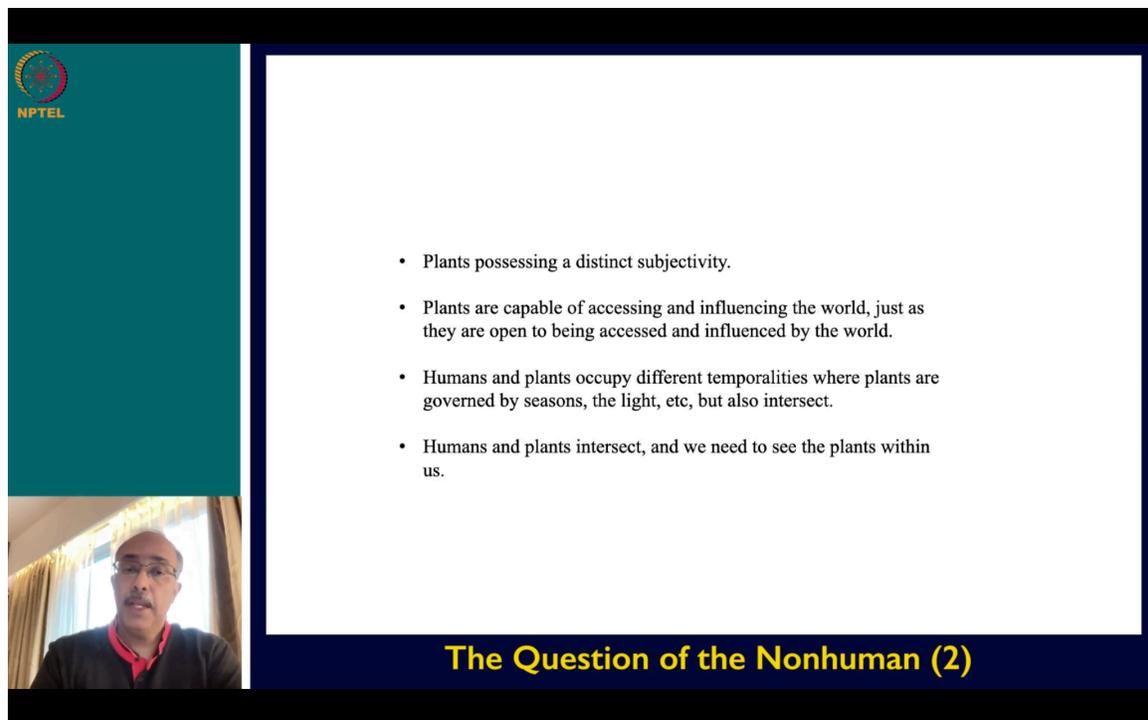
**The Question of the Nonhuman (2)**

Most people have argued that we are not really so invested in or interested in vegetable life. Marder and others note that plants There is a very strong tradition in Western philosophical thought, right from Aristotle onward, about the vegetable and the vegetable soul. You will remember we spoke about the anima, the vital force, often called the soul, that animates life. So the anima animates life.

And critics who work within critical plant studies have noted that there is a tradition in Western thought which attributes a similar vital soul to the plant life form as well. Critical plant studies is an interdisciplinary field that examines the relationship between plants and humans. It also pays attention and places a lot of emphasis on the cultural meanings of plants. We know that, for instance, aboriginal and indigenous cultures of Africa, South Asia, South America, and the aboriginals of Canada and Australia do pay

respect, homage to plants and they see plants as integral to the way the land has developed, the way ecosystems have grown and the way in which plants have contributed to all forms of life not just humans in the form of agriculture but plants have been central to life on earth. As Bailey Brits and Trudens Gibson, two very well-known scholars in plant studies, tell us, plant thinking refers to shifting the agency away from the human and towards vegetal life, which is the backbone, as they argue, of all ecosystems. They also tell us that discounting plant life is a singular and grave ecological and philosophical error. For critical plant studies, plants possess a very clear, very distinct subjectivity. Plants are capable of accessing and influencing the world just as they are open to being accessed and influenced by the world.

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- Plants possessing a distinct subjectivity.
- Plants are capable of accessing and influencing the world, just as they are open to being accessed and influenced by the world.
- Humans and plants occupy different temporalities where plants are governed by seasons, the light, etc, but also intersect.
- Humans and plants intersect, and we need to see the plants within us.

**The Question of the Nonhuman (2)**

Humans and plants occupy very different temporalities as in time frames. The plants, as we know, are governed by seasons including the availability of sunlight, the availability of rainfall, etc. But human and plant life also intersect, that we may occupy different temporalities, but our lives, our physiologies intersect at some point. We need to see the plants within us, as many of the plant critics would say.

So the questions Michael Marder asks are as follows. What forms of thinking do plants possess? Given the fact that we assume all thinking occurs because of a central nervous system, a brain and things like that, and the plants do not have such a central nervous system. What forms of thinking do plants possess? Then, the second question is, how do humans think about plants?

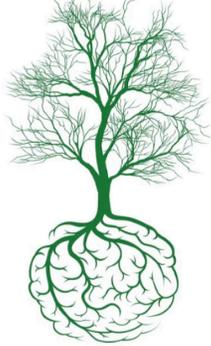
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Questions:

- What forms of thinking do plants (lacking a central nervous system/brain) engage in?
- How do humans think about plants?
- How is human thinking about plants influenced by our encounter with plants?

(Marder)



**The Question of the Nonhuman (2)**

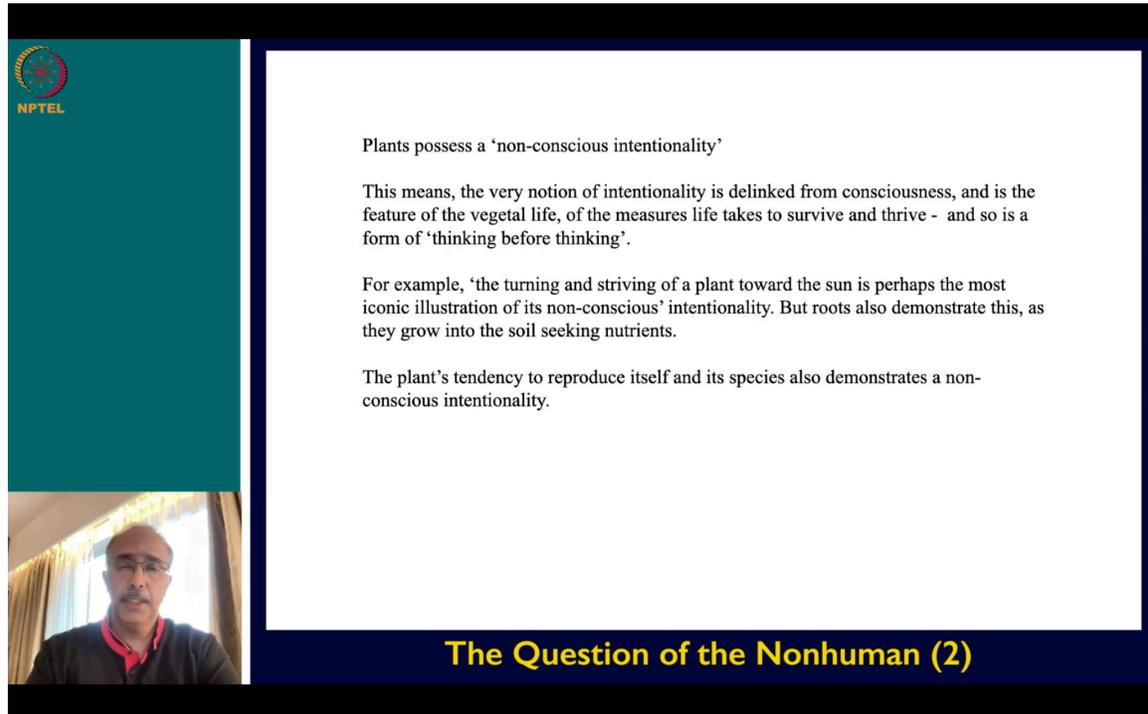
Note the fact that critical plant studies have observed a tradition of thinking about plants as possessing a soul. But do we think about plants? Animal studies, particularly animal rights scholars, right from Peter Singer downwards, have established that humans think considerably about animal rights. And in the discussions we have had before on the modules we have had on animal studies, we have looked at critics like Erica Fudge, who have noted how humanity has classified plants, has looked at plants, them, ethnicizing them, sentimentalized them, and so on. But how do humans think about plants?

Then, of course, how is our thinking as humans about plants influenced by our encounters with them? So for Michael Marder, these are key questions. What forms of thinking do plants possess? Do they think? Do they think at all?

More and more anthropological studies from Annette Singh and others have noted that forests have collective thinking abilities. It's the subject of, and this is a book I've mentioned before, Richard Powers's famous *The Overstory*. And they have tried to establish that plants do think. Plants have a collective thinking process, as in the entire forest comes together to think. Second question, to repeat, how do humans think about plants?

Finally, how is human thinking about plants influenced by our encounters with plants? For people within critical plant studies like Michael Marder, Prudence Gibson, and others, plants possess what they call a non-conscious intentionality. A non-conscious intentionality. This means that our concept of intention and intentionality has to be delinked from consciousness. They argue that

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Plants possess a 'non-conscious intentionality'

This means, the very notion of intentionality is delinked from consciousness, and is the feature of the vegetal life, of the measures life takes to survive and thrive - and so is a form of 'thinking before thinking'.

For example, 'the turning and striving of a plant toward the sun is perhaps the most iconic illustration of its non-conscious' intentionality. But roots also demonstrate this, as they grow into the soil seeking nutrients.

The plant's tendency to reproduce itself and its species also demonstrates a non-conscious intentionality.

**The Question of the Nonhuman (2)**

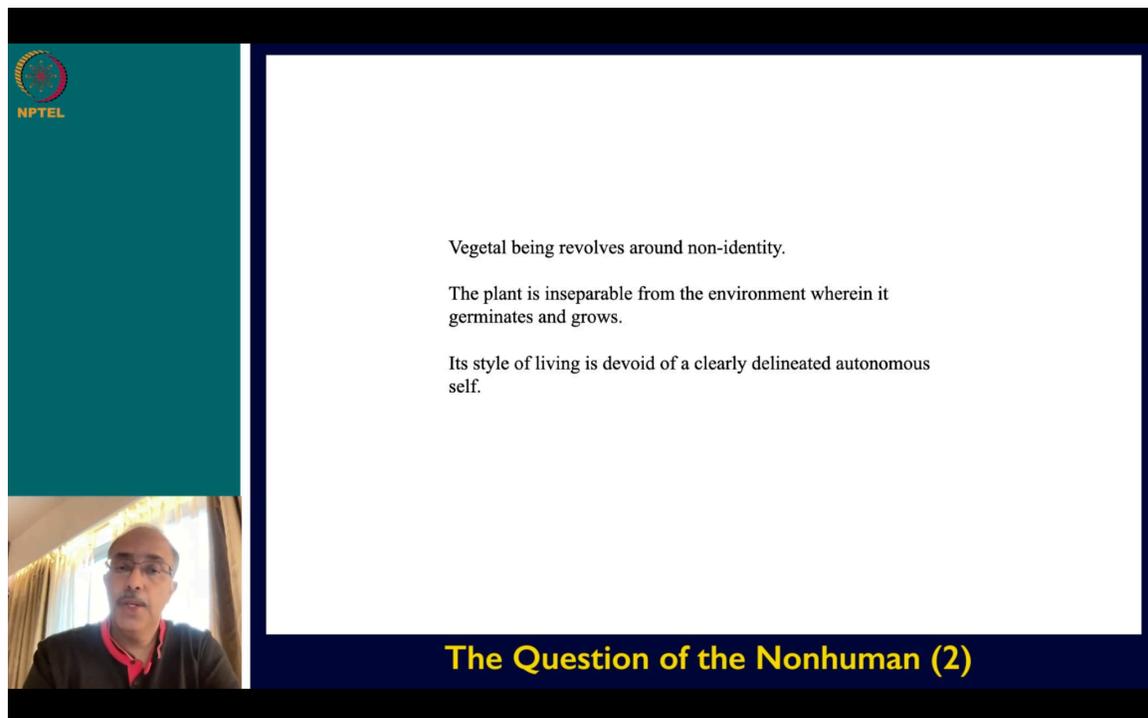
This is the key characteristic of vegetal life, of the measures that plant life takes to survive, to thrive, and is what they call thinking before thinking. The standard example critical plant studies scholars give is this one. How do plants turn toward the sun? Is it done consciously or unconsciously? When they speak about non-conscious intentionality, this is the example they give.

And let's take the exact opposite. The roots grow into the soil, seeking nutrients. So in both cases, we see that the plant undertakes a certain process: it grows, it turns toward the sun in literature, it's often called heliotrope, 'helios' meaning the sun and the plant turns toward the sun. Then, the exact opposite of it: the root goes down into the soil, looking for nutrients. Further and further down until it finds the appropriate nutrient levels and the kinds of nutrients it wants. The plant also has a tendency to reproduce as a species, as a form of life.

All plants demonstrate a non-conscious intentionality here. So the absence of a nervous system The absence of an identifiable physiological or anatomical feature is not necessarily a deterrent to thinking. It is also seen as not a barrier to the exact same kinds of things that animals and other life forms do expressions of intentionality, which means intentionality does not necessarily require a central nervous system.

The process of thinking without thinking or thinking before thinking occurs even in plants, although plants lack a central nervous system. For critical plant theorists, vegetal being as in plant being, being as in the ontological category in philosophy of existence, vegetal being revolves around non-identity. That's an odd way of thinking about it, because for all other life forms, we think of existence and being as centering and centered around identity. But for vegetal beings, for vegetal existence, the particular plant is inseparable from the environment in which it is present. In which it is embedded in a very literal sense, because plants are embedded in the soil.

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Vegetal being revolves around non-identity.

The plant is inseparable from the environment wherein it germinates and grows.

Its style of living is devoid of a clearly delineated autonomous self.

**The Question of the Nonhuman (2)**

So for plant studies people, this style of life is very clearly indicative of the fact that there is no autonomous self, that there is no such thing as an independent, autonomous plant, but all plants are rooted they are embedded and rooted in very literal senses in the environment in which they germinate, in which they grow, and in which they reproduce. So there is no autonomous plant being. There's no autonomous plant existence, and you can clearly see why vegetal studies or plant studies is so central to the post-humanist school of thought because, let me reiterate this at the risk of invoking boredom, for post-humanists, there is no such thing as an autonomous self or an autonomous being, right? For the post-humanists, All life forms are interconnected. All life forms are networked.

They are mutually dependent. For the post-humanists, life connects to other forms of life, grows with them, or, as they call it, co-becoming. They draw on them. Under such circumstances, very clearly, Vegetal life is important because it demonstrates that the plant, being embedded in a particular soil, in a particular ecosystem, lives because of the system.

It grows because of the system. It reproduces because of this ecosystem, which demonstrates that the plant is not autonomous. And this fits the post-humanist school of thought perfectly, because just as the plant is not autonomous, Just as the plant is not a self-limiting, autonomous, sealed-off entity, no life form really is. To be a plant is to grow endlessly, says Michael Marder.

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To be a plant is to grow endlessly, to move outward, to not be limited by the self or selfish reasons, and to scatter fruit, oxygen and seeds all around (the latter is what Marder calls 'throwness').



**The Question of the Nonhuman (2)**



To move outward, to be not limited by the self or, as they put it, selfish reasons. It scatters fruit, oxygen, and seeds all around. This latter act of scattering things all around is what Michael Marder calls thrownness. It throws things around. Again, you can see why this idea, this theorization of plant life, is so central to posthumanism, because it suggests that life scatters, does not come close, close up, and stay within a hermetically sealed environment.

Vegetal life, as Michael Marder and others theorize, is a great example of thrownness. It throws things out. It sends out its pollen. It sends out its fruit.

It sends out oxygen. It doesn't draw things in. It draws things in. Yes, it does. I mean, that's how it lives.

It takes in sunlight and nutrients from the soil. But it throws things out. So, for Michael Marder and others, the notion of the plant as possessing a self or selfishness is a contradiction. A plant, by definition, throws things out, scatters.

And it's an important way of thinking about it because it once again shows how plant life is constantly giving to the environment, not just taking from it. As a node in a network, as one unit in a large enmeshed network, the plant draws in sustenance, nutrition, whatever

you want to call it, but also gives the essence of plant life. Right. So this is an important way of thinking about it. What's also important and interesting about critical plant studies is that it has constantly looked at indigenous knowledge by which I mean all forms of non-European knowledge systems to rethink the ways in which you can look at plants.

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Critical Plant Studies turns to indigenous (non-European) knowledge systems to rethink the ways in which to look at plants.

The Goolarabooloo people of the West Kimberley in Australia to pose different relations between human and environment. The Goolarabooloo sustain a cosmos of networked connections among humans, plants, animals, and earth formations. Humans in this community play their part in enlivening the dreaming law. The Gadgur tree is cut and its parts are used for the ceremony of the dreaming law. The Gadgur leaf and wood are associated with the 'making of men' and so must be protected: 'humans and trees are destined and designed to care for each other.'

Baylee Brits and Prudence Gibson

Aboriginal elder Bill Neidjie: 'Tree...he watching you. You look at tree, he listen to you. He got no finger, he can't speak. But that leaf...he pumping, growing, growing in the night ...'

Matthew Hall, *Plants as Persons*

## The Question of the Nonhuman (2)

For many of the critics, plants are persons. So Bailey, Brits, and Trudens Gibson, whom I've cited before, note the Aboriginal people of the West Kimberley area in Australia, how they posit different relations between humans and the environment. The Gularabulu people sustain, they say, a cosmos of networked connections among humans, plants, animals, and earth formations. And humans in this community play a part in living the Dreaming Law. Various parts of a plant are used for ritual ceremonies in the Dreaming Law.

And they make the argument that humans and trees are designed to care for each other. They're designed to care for each other. And it's an important way of looking at it. Just as plants take in things and give back to the environment, the question we have to ask is: if humans take things from the environment, what do they give back to it? So it becomes, in many ways, a

a moral or ethical lesson and this is something that posthumanism is particularly fascinated by that the indigenous traditions do have something of great significance to teach us that humans and trees are designed and designed to care for each other and this is an idea this is a philosophical position that european traditions have not bothered with I've never had that you can't just take from nature, you give back to nature. And the example of the tree or the plant is that it takes from nature, but it also offers a

considerable portion of itself to the world, to nature, to the ecosystem. For post-humanists, this is a very particular ethical stance. And that the indigenous tribes, indigenous peoples, indigenous cultures around the world have this ethical stance is something posthumanism wishes that we learn from.

By we, I'm referring to, of course, those who are not part of the indigenous cultural systems or peoples and that they teach us this very valuable lesson. And Matthew Hall, who has this very famous book, *Plantless Persons*, cites an Aboriginal elder who says, and I quote here, and you can see it on your screen as well, *Tree, he is watching you. You look at the tree, he listens to you. He has no fingers, he can't speak. But that leaf, he bumping, growing, growing in the night.*

Note the emphasis on the fact that Despite not having a nervous system, despite not having a certain kind of intentionality which we assume life forms have, the indigenous tribe leader is referring to the plant as listening, as processing what it hears, as paying attention to who is speaking, what is being spoken of. As he says, he has no finger, he can't speak, but that leaf, he is pumping, growing, growing in the night. Several biologists, even those who work within the botanical sciences, have, however, worried that this is a very romanticized or perhaps an exaggerated notion of what plants are. are.

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Sceptics however do worry as to whether plants have intentional states. They argue that we are limited in our understanding a human-like intelligence because we can't move out of our own human consciousness/subjectivity when speaking of plants.

Classifying plants as individuals or as a confederation has also been rejected by many.

'Describing an individual plant as being 'a democratic confederation' ... implies a complexity to the interaction between organs which would demand a cogitative ability beyond that actually demonstrated in plants. It may be more appropriate to consider a plant as operating normally as a simple economic federation of many specialized economies'

Richard Finn

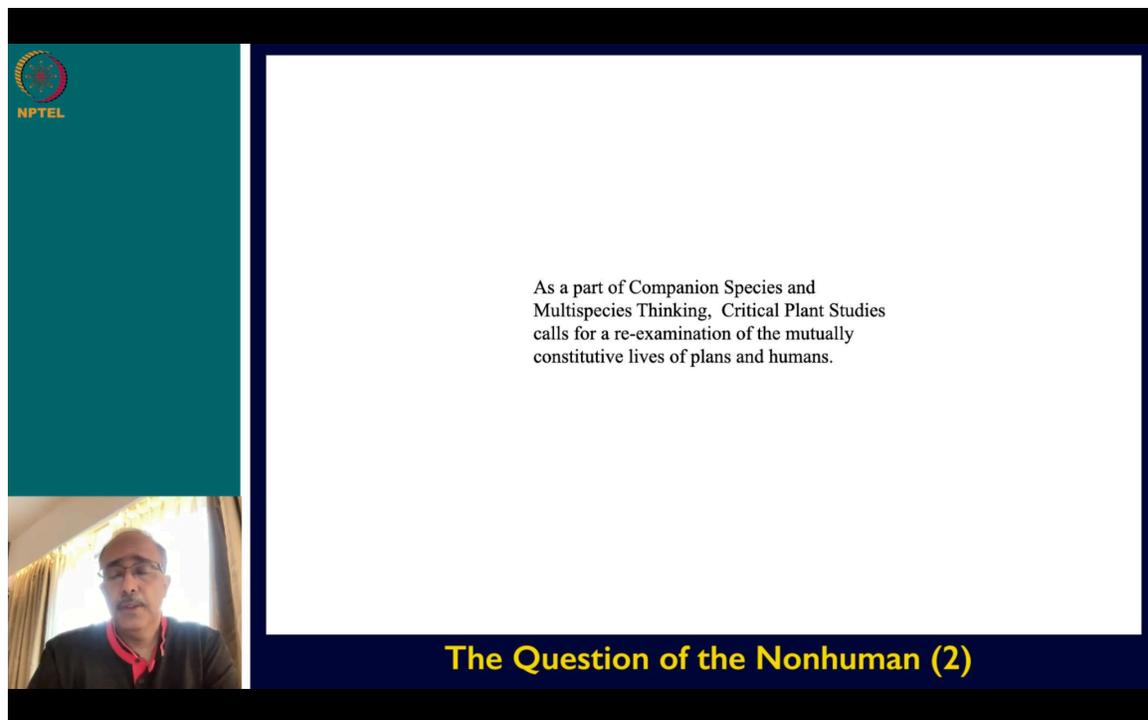
## The Question of the Nonhuman (2)

They worry that you can't really attribute intentions to plants. They argue that we are very limited in our understanding and cannot move out of our own consciousness or subjectivity when speaking of plants. In fact, this applies to animals as well because we If you go back to Thomas Nagel's famous essay, 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?' An early '80s essay which pioneered major philosophical debates.

The question is, you might want to cast yourself, imagine yourself as a plant or an animal, but you can't be a plant or an animal, as a human cannot be a plant or an animal. You simply cannot. So for many critics in botanical sciences, this idea that you can speak of plants, but you can only speak about plants from our own human consciousness or our own subjective position. These are people who also reject the idea that plants are individuals or a conflagration or a collective. As Richard Fern famously argued, describing and I'm quoting here, and it's on your screen as well 'describing an individual plant as being a democratic confederation implies a complexity to the interaction between organs, which would demand a cognitive ability that is actually demonstrated in plants.'

It may be more appropriate to consider a plant as operating normally as a simple economic federation of many specialized economies. So be that as it may, for people like Donna Haraway and those working within companion species and multispecies studies and theories intersecting, of course, with the post-human critical plant studies invites us to re-examine the mutually constitutive lives of plants and humans, that we depend on plants. We live because of plants. Our ecosystem depends on plants. The balance of nature, as it's sometimes called, depends on plants.

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As a part of Companion Species and Multispecies Thinking, Critical Plant Studies calls for a re-examination of the mutually constitutive lives of plants and humans.

At the bottom of the slide, the text **The Question of the Nonhuman (2)** is displayed in yellow.

So you might disagree that plants have a consciousness or a subjectivity and that they have a thinking before thinking or a non-conscious intentionality. That is wrong. That remains a problem and that remains a philosophical but also a biological scientific issue to be settled. That's a different issue. But the point I'm trying to make is for critical posthumanism with its insistence on network sharing, mutual dependency and the denial of autonomy as a state of being, critical plant studies has much to offer.

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References

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Firn, Richard. 'Plant Intelligence: An Alternative Point of View'. *Annals of Botany* 93.4 (2003).

Gibson, Prudence and Baylee Brits (ed) *Covert Plants: Vegetal Consciousness and Agency in an Anthropocentric World*. Brainstorm Books, 2018.

Hall, Matthew. *Plants as Persons*. State University of New York Press, 2011.

**The Question of the Nonhuman (2)**

It tells us that The idea of a self or the idea of a selfish self, which is Michael Marder's play on the terms, is not possible. And it's exemplified by plants because plants give, plants exchange. And plants show that you live because of an ecosystem. Your life is sustained because of an ecosystem.

Without that ecosystem, you simply cannot manage. And for post-humanists, this is a particularly attractive idea. Thank you.