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Plant sentience and the case for ethical veganism

Commentary on [Segundo-Ortin & Calvo](#) on *Plant Sentience*

Josh Milburn

International Relations, Politics and History
Loughborough University, UK

Abstract: Does the possibility of plant sentience pose a problem for ethical veganism? It has not yet been demonstrated that plants are sentient (i.e., that they can feel). Moreover, even if it were demonstrated that plants could feel, it would also have to be demonstrated that they can feel the affectively “valenced” feelings that are ethically significant, such as pain and fear, rather than just neutral sensations such as darker/lighter, or wetter/drier. Finally, if plants could feel valenced feelings, veganism would likely still be the ethical option, on the principle of causing the least harm.

[Josh Milburn](#) is a Lecturer in Political Philosophy at Loughborough University. He writes mostly about animal ethics, and is the author of *Just Fodder: The Ethics of Feeding Animals* (2022, McGill-Queen’s University Press) and *Food, Justice, and Animals: Feeding the World Respectfully* (2023, Oxford University Press). [Website](#)



In a chapter provocatively titled “Plant Liberation,” Calvo & Lawrence (2022, 181) report that some “vegans and vegetarians” find their “ethical frameworks thoroughly shaken” by Calvo’s arguments. Similarly, Michael Marder, in *Plant-Thinking*, reports that his “non-vegetarian acquaintances rejoice in the idea that those who refuse to eat meat might not be righteous after all” (2013, 185).

Part of taking the possibility of plant sentience seriously is to ask what its ethical consequences would be. Indeed, Segundo-Ortin & Calvo (2023) conclude their target article with ethics. Should ethical vegans be worried about plant sentience?

Consider a rights-based case for veganism: If animals have rights because they are sentient, and plants are sentient, then surely plants should have rights, too. That would create a dilemma. Either it is ethical for humans to eat rights-bearers, or it is unethical for them to eat either animals *or* plants. The former would seem to undermine veganism. The latter would seem to entail human extinction.

A natural way to overcome this dilemma would be to deny that plants are sentient. This is the route taken by many animal ethicists. Martha Nussbaum (2022, 148-52), for example, doubts that plants are sentient and hence excludes them from the domain of justice. Many will share her doubts.

But there would be other ways to overcome the dilemma. Animal ethicists and vegans could hold that what is ethically relevant about sentience is “affective valence.” Sentient states can include affectively neutral sensations – such as, for humans, what it feels like to see blue or to hear a swish, or to feel warm, or to touch a wet surface – as well as affectively “valenced”

states such pain or pleasure. I have argued (Milburn 2023, chap. 2) that it is the valenced states that matter for rights-attribution. If plants could only feel affectively neutral states, then, although they would be (in a sense) sentient, they would not be rights bearers.

“Sentience,” for Segundo-Ortin & Calvo, “refers to the capacity of an individual to have felt states, including sensory experiences, external or internal” (2023, 1; cf. Lamey 2019, 207). The target article does call for investigation of valenced sentience in plants (2023, 19), but Segundo-Ortin & Calvo do not seem to consider it necessary for sentience *simpliciter*. So perhaps their case for plant sentience does not concern the case for veganism.

What if plants do have valenced experiences? Presumably, this would mean humans must recognise that *whatever* step they take may harm beings with important interests. This does not mean we should adopt an anything-goes ethical view. But it might mean that we should aim for actions causing the least harm, rather than quixotically striving to do no harm at all (Sebo 2022).

Such ethical reasoning likely still favours veganism. For example, if exploiting fewer plants is the aim, it is better to eat soybeans than to cycle soy through cattle for beef. “Plants matter too” can be an argument for veganism.

But we can also ask which kinds of plant exploitation are harmless, or less harmful. For example, some “fruitarian” vegans eat only fruit that plants have “dropped” themselves. Perhaps we don’t need to be so extreme. Can we harvest fruit without hurting plants? Picking a raspberry may be analogous to trimming hair, rather than dismembering.

Maybe plant interests are quite different from animal interests. For example, death might not be bad for a plant. If so, harvesting potatoes needn’t worry us, even if it kills the plant. And perhaps only *some* plants are sentient. Even if we must be careful with peas – a favourite example of Segundo-Ortin & Calvo – that tells us nothing about wheat.

But this is all just speculation. There would be work to do incorporating plants into animal ethics – *if* plants had valenced sentience. That’s a big if.

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