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Language matters

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

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Abstract: The term sentience tends to be associated with affective valence along with affectively neutral sensory states. In the absence of evidence for affectively laden states in plants, the use of the term sentience in the exploration of plant sensory and behavioral complexity is misleading and ethically problematic for its potential to trivialize animal sentience.

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Segundo-Ortin & Calvo (2023) provide compelling evidence for capacities of plant organisms that go beyond mere hardwired reactivity, pointing towards a sensory and behavioral complexity and flexibility usually associated with animal rather than plant life. Since organisms live in dynamic, ever-changing environments, such a wealth of perceptual and responsive potential in plants comes as no surprise. I can even imagine that, at some rudimentary level, the question of *what is it like to be a cactus* may indeed have an answer, or perhaps many, depending on the type of cactus.

When used appropriately, imagination and comparisons to what we know and understand better—in this case animals, as Pessoa (2023) also points out—are helpful on many levels (e.g., they help come up with research questions). However, comparisons to animals used without adequate caution can have serious ethical implications, not only because they may put scientific quality at risk (Struik 2023) but also because they can trivialize animal sentience and jeopardize efforts to expose and eliminate the ubiquitous violence inflicted upon nonhuman animals. The catchy title ‘Plant liberation’ (reported in Milburn 2023), likely inspired by Singer’s influential book *Animal Liberation*, may attract members of the public who are genuinely concerned about the possibility of plant sentience and will use the information to perform a critical self-evaluation towards greater personal integrity—but mostly it will be used to fuel sensationalism, misinformation and moral laziness.

Language matters. More often than not, the term sentience is associated with affective valence, which informs ethical considerations. I remain uncomfortable with the term sentience applied to plants especially in communication with a broader, less technically minded audience, because the important distinction between affectively neutral sentient states and affectively valenced ones (Milburn 2023, see also Booth 2023 and Harnad 2023) is likely to get lost.

One of the most fascinating attributes of plant life is its capacity for regeneration and ensuing resilience. Regeneration characterizes all life forms but plants stand out in important ways. Before sitting down to write this commentary I walked past a telling example, namely, the green onions (scallions) growing in my garden: I cut the above-ground, green part off for cooking purposes, leaving the roots intact, it always grows back. Without irreplaceable organs and with a modular design, Marcuso tells us (cited in Pollan 2013), plants can lose up to ninety percent of their body without being killed. That would mean a lot of suffering for an organism capable of experiencing pain. The organism would require a very high pain threshold, or a mechanism that quickly kicks in to numb the pain, or perhaps we simply cannot talk about pain the way we know it.

I've spent some time lately crawling on the ground with a macro photographic lens. It has exposed an amplitude of the [plant and animal world around me](#) that was completely unknown to me. It's a world of resilience but also a world of significant vulnerability and extinction threats. Despite the likely absence of affectively valenced sentient states in plants, I'm in agreement with proponents of moral consideration of plants and of a heightened appreciation of their natural behaviors and potentials (e.g. Struik 2023; Marder 2103). Substantial damage has been caused by unguarded instrumentalization. Trying to de-instrumentalize life generally, as I've suggested previously (Brooks Pribac 2021), benefits everyone.

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