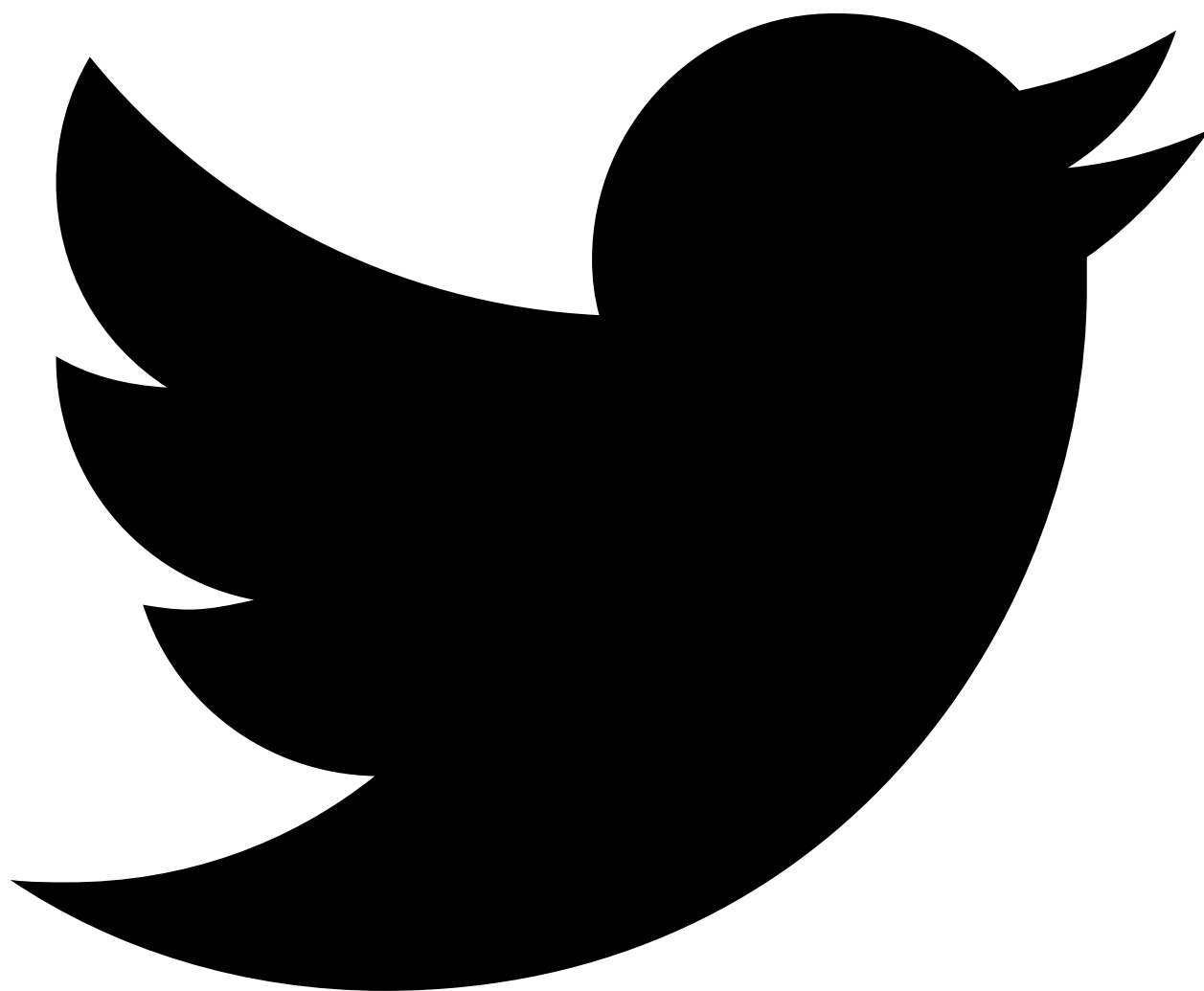


Good Grief: Now It's PEA Personhood!

Wesley J. Smith May 1, 2012 [Human Exceptionalism](#)



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Just when you thought things could not get any weirder: Last Sunday, The New York Times — *of course!* — ran a piece in its Sunday opinion section by a university professor — *of course!* — claiming that it is unethical to eat certain plants.

According to Michael Marder, recent discoveries show that peas communicate with each other through their root systems and soil. Of course, being plants, pea "communication" doesn't involve the least level of sentience, not to mention rationality. It is a purely chemical response to environmental stimuli.

But should pea chemical communication elevate the moral value of peas?

Yes, according to Marder (my emphasis):

When it comes to a plant, *it turns out to be not only a what but also a who* — an agent in its milieu, *with its own intrinsic value or version of the good*. Inquiring into justifications for consuming *vegetal beings* thus reconceived, we reach one of the final frontiers of dietary ethics.

Good grief. Plants aren't "beings" and "who" equates to personhood. But plants don't have any "version of the good — or for that matter, the bad: They are *plants!*

Marder then claims that plant sophistication means we should not eat them unless they live for several growing seasons:

The "renewable" aspects of perennial plants may be accepted by humans *as a gift of vegetal being* and integrated into their diets. *But it would be harder to justify the cultivation of peas and other annual plants*, the entire being of which humans devote to externally imposed ends.

I hate to repeat myself, but good grief! *People are starving in the world* and Marder worries about the ethics of eating peas and carrots! Worse, the piece *runs with all due respect in the Sunday opinion section of the nation's Paper of Record!* (Yes, I'm yelling.)

If Marder's piece was just a bizarre outlier, his column might be dismissed with a chuckle and an eye roll. Alas, the plants-are-persons-too meme

has been gaining traction in recent years. For example, back in 2009, Natalie Angier, a science columnist for The Times (yes, again) marveled like Marder about the sophistication of plant biology, and then jumped her own shark by [claiming](#) that plants are the most ethical life forms on the planet!

But before we cede the entire moral penthouse to “committed vegetarians” and “strong ethical vegans,” we might consider that *plants no more aspire to being stir-fried in a wok* than a hog aspires to being peppercorn-studded in my Christmas clay pot. This is not meant as a trite argument or a chuckled aside. *Plants are lively and seek to keep it that way.*

Surely as a science writer, Angier must know that plants don't “aspire” to anything. For example, they may appear to “reach out” to the sun, but it is all chemical. But that doesn't stop Angier from larding on the anthropomorphism:

Just because we humans can't hear them doesn't mean plants don't howl. Some of the compounds that plants generate in response to insect mastication — their feedback, you might say — are volatile chemicals that serve as cries for help. Such airborne alarm calls have been shown to attract both large predatory insects like dragon flies, which delight in caterpillar meat, and tiny parasitic insects, which can infect a caterpillar and destroy it from within.

Please. It's merely natural selection in action, not a cry for help. And get this ending:

It's a small daily tragedy that we animals must kill to stay alive. *Plants are the ethical autotrophs here*, the ones that wrest their meals from the sun. Don't expect them to boast: they're too busy fighting to survive.

No, plants are not ethical. That requires thought and free will. Besides, Venus fly traps digest insects alive.

Yes, I know it is very easy to dismiss these pieces as mere op-ed fodder. But plant dignity is now the law in Switzerland. A few years ago, the Swiss Parliament added a new clause to the Federal Constitution requiring that "account to be taken of the dignity of creation when handling animals, plants and other organisms."

No one knew exactly what "plant dignity" meant, so the government asked the Swiss Federal Ethics Committee on Non-Human Biotechnology to figure it out. The resulting report, "[The Dignity of Living Beings with Regard to Plants](#)," is enough to short circuit the brain:

A "clear majority" of the panel adopted what it called a "biocentric" moral view, meaning that "living organisms should be considered morally for their own sake because they are alive." Thus, the panel determined that we cannot claim "absolute ownership" over plants and, moreover, that "individual plants have an inherent worth." This means that "we may not use them just as we please, even if the plant community is not in danger, or if our actions do not endanger the species, or if we are not acting arbitrarily."

The committee offered this illustration: A farmer mows his field — apparently an acceptable action, the report doesn't say why. But then, while walking home, he casually "decapitates" some wildflowers with his scythe; a callous act the bioethicists "condemned" as "immoral." What should happen to the heinous plant decapitator, the report does not say.

The Times' columns (and other advocacy pieces I could quote), along with Switzerland's actually enshrining "plant dignity" into law, and other similar radical proposals such as "[nature rights](#)," are symptoms of a societally enervating relativism that is causing us to lose the ability to think critically and distinguish serious from frivolous ethical concerns.

They also reflect the advance of a radical misanthropy that elevates elements of the natural world to the moral status of humans, or perhaps better stated, [devalues us](#) to the level of flora and fauna.

Here's the bottom line: When you eschew human exceptionalism, you go flat out nuts. (Oops. I just insulted a whole family of plants. But it's okay. Peanut bushes and almond trees are perennials, so they probably have good senses of humor.)

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