

In (Philosophical) Defense of Trees

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With deforestation claiming seventeen percent of the Amazonian forest in the last fifty years alone, who would have thought that trees would need to be defended from... a philosophical onslaught? And yet, the attack came from the most unlikely of corners, launched as it was by trendy representatives of French post-structuralism.

The writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have given trees a bad reputation. To put it succinctly, for them, arborescent logic and imagery connote hierarchy, verticality, and the movement of transcendence, whereas rhizomatic assemblages betoken a certain kind of equality, horizontality and immanence. Rhizomes are modified horizontal subterranean stems that, much like seeds, can develop roots and shoots. Those of ginger, turmeric, and lotus are perhaps the most familiar (because edible) examples. Grass, too, fares better in the eyes of the authors of *Anti-Oedipus* than trees. It is, after all, quite democratic and egalitarian; growing close to ground-level, its blades do not entertain any dreams of penetrating the depths of the earth and of soaring toward the expanse of the sky with its branches. Inside us, humans, there is also grass, or at least the grass-like structuration of the brain: “Many people have a tree growing in their head, but the brain itself is much more a grass than a tree.”^[1]

It is, at the same time, crucial for Deleuze and Guattari not to fall back into the vertical system of valuation, which they criticize, in associating the rhizome, or grass, with something unequivocally “good” and the tree with the “bad.” As they note in *A Thousand Plateaus*: “The important point is that the root-tree and canal-rhizome are not two opposed models: the first operates as a transcendent model and tracing, even if it engenders its own escapes; the second operates as an immanent process that overturns the model and outlines a map, even if it constitutes its own hierarchies [...].”^[2] There is a little bit of a rhizome in a tree, just as there is a modicum of a tree in the rhizome; immanence is shot through with the possibilities for transcendence; a transcendent model can devolve into immanence through its own escape routes; equality can reconstitute a hierarchy; the horizontal and the vertical dimensions are entangled with one another.

This disclaimer aside, Deleuze and Guattari got “arborescence” all wrong. The physical verticality of trees does not mean that they are vertical in the way they live or grow. Trees can branch out in quite unpredictable ways; they can accommodate the grafts of other species; they can give rise to shoots that would survive independently of them; they can change their sexes or become hermaphrodites for a part or for the rest of their lives; and the list goes on. To put it in Heideggerese, *trees are ontically vertical and ontologically horizontal*. Although they tower in measurable height over and above the grass, they are as egalitarian as the most humble of plants. In fact, given how some tree species share their root system, they can be thought of as overgrown grass. For instance, Pando, which is a grove of quaking aspens in Fishlake National Forest (Utah) has the largest root system in the world: over 106 acres, what sprouts above the ground are genetically identical trees. So, what would be the advantage of a rhizome over the roots found in Pando?

Strictly speaking, the most ontologically vertical notion in biology is that of an organism. In an organism, there is a rigid hierarchy between the different organs—some of them vitally important, others less so—and the predominance of the whole over the parts. Plants, in their turn, do not follow the organismic model of development, and trees are not an exception. Even if they might be, or appear to be, more individuated than other vegetal beings, such as grass, their parts (for instance, branches) are not really organs limited in terms of their number, position in a body, and so forth. It may well be that all plants, including trees, are the most faithful instantiations of “bodies without organs,” which Deleuze and Guattari so admired.

Clearly, the penchant for the rhizome over the root derives from an objection to the metaphysical obsession with depth, often associated with the hidden and *radical* nature of the underlying source of visible appearances. But the root of a tree is far from being its origin; as in all other plants, it is but one extreme in the polarization of a shoot, a seed, or an acorn that grows up and down simultaneously when planted in the ground. Whatever resembles the source in a plant is always a variation on, of, and from the middle—the extension of the middle in every direction, both vertically

and laterally. “Rhizome” is a part of the vegetal world that symbolizes the whole: trees, too, are rhizomes, proliferating *between* roots and shoots.

I could add to this brief defense of trees the observation that they have been beneficial for a venerable tradition of “philosophies of immanence,” going back to Plotinus, the tradition, to which Deleuze and Guattari willy-nilly belong. For Plotinus, the universe is a “great tree,” on which all living and even inorganic entities, are branches, leaves, and buds. The tree is a fold—the same, varied with regard to itself. Deleuze himself suggests that Spinozan “attributes” can be understood through the example of “a seed which ‘expresses’ the tree as a whole.”^[3] For Bergson, each tree is a society, rather than an individual; an articulation of multiplicities, rather than a living *unit*. The tree and the root are *essentially superficial*, regardless of the height and the depth they have come to represent. It is both philosophically and ethically irresponsible to turn them into villains, especially compared to grass that grows in many recently deforested areas, serving as feed for the cattle raised there. Instead of symbolically charged preferences, which Deleuze and Guattari clothe in sloppy philosophical justifications, philosophers of immanence would do well to cultivate all plants, both outside us and in us—in our daily living and thinking.

NOTES

[1] Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (New York & London: Continuum, 2004), p. 17.

[2] Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 22.

[3] Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, translated by Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1992), p. 80.