
Care Ethics and Actor-Networking Theory as Challenges to the Ethics of Philosophical Thinking

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Abstract: Contemporary philosophy has been always examining new methods of philosophising and approaching social, political and cultural discourse. However, the global climate change and new geopolitical orders call for a new critical analysis. The essay explores horizon of ethical philosophising, questioning validity of traditional scholarly knowledge. Addressing Bruno Latour's idea of actor-networking theory and Puig de la Bellacasa's reflection on care, it aims to bring forth the concept of "thinking-with-care" and the role of the Anthropocene, advocating decentralized thinking and bringing new meanings to phenomena and experiences which have not been taken into consideration by, for instance, academic philosophy. The text tackles new research approaches based in the practice of ethical thinking and writing. It ponders questions of care the way they are discussed in works of Joan C. Tronto, Donna J. Haraway, and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, and it sketches possible new paths of ethical thinking, i. e. thinking with the other and thinking for the other. The challenge of this essay is to reflect whether we can implement "thinking-with" in philosophical writing and questing in current conditions of war, natural disasters, and changing political regimes. It concludes that thinking-with-care and thinking-for can bring an importance of social responsiveness into the practice of philosophising, accentuating that ethics should be situated in the interconnected net-work of the world.

Keywords: Care, Ethics, Thinking with Care, Actor-Networking Theory, Agency, Others

1. Introduction

Considering the recent challenges such as global warming, COVID 19 pandemics and wars, it is evident that our world has changed dramatically, bringing onto the surface a fundamental crisis of ethics and moral values. The new social and political regimes have demonstrated that our ways of philosophical thinking and knowledge production are not anymore able to assess and problematise these changes. Many researchers have characterized this époque as the era of the posthuman, questioning the dominance of the human being and the necessity of the category of the human subject.

One of the popular movements of posthuman thinking is a philosophy of the Anthropocene developed in works by Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa. The "Anthropocene" describes a history of the most recent relations between the human kind, technologies, nature and the Earth. In *Matters of Care* [2] Maria Puig de la Bellacasa advances the practice of decentralized thinking by grounding it in *thinking-with-care*. What interests her the most is whether

thinking with care as a practice of the Anthropocene has potential to create new modalities of subjectivity connected to the global network.

Within this perspective, I imagine that the Anthropocene also requires new ways of thinking. Such questions as the ethical aspects of human development, the finitude of our civilization and the natural environment, responsiveness, responsibility, auto-affection and relationships to oneself and one's own sensibility are rephrased, bringing new focus in philosophical discourse [1]. Thus, new challenges arising for philosophical thinking are: how to explore and how to respond to these often-unparalleled situations? I believe that one of the productive ways is to introduce and to practice indirect philosophising. For me, indirect philosophy is, first of all, a practice of ethical presence, when instead of advancing ethical positions, norms, and values the questioning subject preserves the space of proximity, i. e. maintaining in spoken and written language the alterity of experiences and phenomena. Indirect philosophising is to care about the other/s presence in practice of letting them be, avoiding heavy conceptualization and

thematization. It is a non-judgmental holding space for other voices in between lines of the text. To philosophise indirectly means to introduce and to follow care thinking, which is to engage and share traumatic trajectories of existence of other marginalized species of this earthbound life. In many senses, to think indirectly is to take into consideration awkward or abrupt situations and experiences, imagining the “how” of the existence of other species which have been either neglected or subordinated to the central role of the human being.

To open a new horizon of philosophising, we would have to change philosophical focus from tackling well-established anthropocentric thinking and concepts to indirect philosophising which would aim to analyze experiences of otherness: of being a refugee, homeless, unemployed, subjected to deportation, being a single parent, being ill, as well as individual stories and stories of communities which are affected by wars or climate change, damaged or wasted territories and lives of plants and animals. Such otherness of life comes to our social and environmental scene more and more often. In this essay, I want to sketch out the way indirect philosophy is connected to the idea of the Anthropocene and grounded in the concept of *thinking-with-care*. I believe that thinking-with-care can be understood as a method of philosophising that helps to move away from the dominant role of the human species, which is widely accepted in the history of human sciences and, to some extent, is still present in contemporary philosophical discourse. Taking into consideration the critique of the notion of care given by such authors as Joan C. Tronto, I see the practice of thinking-with-care as a path to discussing a more complex sense of human interdependency and interconnection in this world.

One of the first steps I want to take is to address the actor-network theory developed by Bruno Latour. After Latour’s account for interdependency and necessity of care, I will discuss the care theory recently presented by Puig de la Bellacasa. The argument here is that Latour’s and Puig de la Bellacasa’s posthuman approach is helpful for exploring the meanings of *care-for*, that is, connecting species instead of disconnecting, thinking for those who are left in-between of our social networking, expanding our ethical terrain. *Care-for* needs to be incorporated in our knowledge production and in indirect philosophising in order to give voices to the peripheral, marginalized experiences and agencies already present in the network of interdependency of our world.

The reflections presented in this text are an attempt to find possibilities of ethical philosophizing, that is to give significance to care in knowledge production and to attempt to think from marginalized experiences. Thus, addressing the positions of Latour and Puig de la Bellacasa, I want to develop a posthuman thought and to open a horizon of care ethics, and to advance these two modes of thoughts in the direction of indirect philosophy. Moreover, I want to elaborate such an ethics of philosophizing which is not strongly associated with the caring subject and concept of love and care. Rather, I suggest a non-anthropocentric form of caring thinking, which implies moving from the “I care” perspective of centralized

subject to giving voices to all unconceptualized others, making them visible and heard.

2. Bruno Latour’s Decentralized Thinking: Actor-Network Theory, Care, and Translation

In its essence, care is connected with different experiences of vulnerability, inequality and exposure. The practice of caring, such as being non-judgmental, questioning the norms, listening to, or giving voice to, presupposes that we challenge the ideas of being individualists and that we are entirely autonomous, self-supporting and independent. The situation where someone needs care presupposes being vulnerable, which is not easy to recognize. Vulnerability questions the myth that we are to aim to be always autonomous and equal citizens.

However, the concept of care and the state of being vulnerable can be extended from mere human intersubjective relations onto the world, including our interconnection with minerals, plants, animals, as well as with technologies. In this sense, the idea of the Anthropocene and the notion of care presented Bruno Latour’s works can help to accentuate new ways of philosophical thinking, which would locate the ethos of caring in the very center of philosophical argumentation. My intention is not to characterize Latour as a care theorist in the strict sense of the word. Rather, I see him as a scholar who provokes novel ways of analyzing the solid data of applied sciences, statistics, as well as social and political events.

Latour [7] formulates the principles of earthly philosophy and philosophy of being with earthly others, in which he suggests a more radical way of fighting persistent institutionalized reality. He believes that in the social world, everything exists in constantly changing networks: the objects, the ideas, the processes that are involved in the social situation are just as important as the people involved in it:

“The universal crisis that lockdown has exposed is that all the legal and scientific tools which used to allow ‘humans’ to think about their relationships were applied to a world no one had inhabited! We can understand their terror. It was all about the setting of novels written by and about fictional individuals who are now suddenly realizing that they live with Earth, forever entangled, ensnared, enmired, overlapping, in and on top of each other, without being able to limit these ties to either cooperation or competition” (p. 45).

The new active agents of social connections are not only human subjects, but also technological complexes, artifacts, animals and other non-humans. What I consider very promising in Latour’s thinking is that we need to become “earthbound” and to reject tendencies which describe the human subject as supernatural.

Now that more and more diverse, often contradictory information is presented in our media, and more and more stories are told about marginalized experiences and encounters, it has become evident that our philosophising has to take into consideration who is experiencing, who is talking,

to whom the message is addressed and from which social structure the address, judgment or evaluation comes, by and for whom it is made accessible and who does it exclude. What if we focus on how scientific knowledge is rooted in cultural practices which involves instruments, machinery, arts, other species, minerals, and bacteria that have sometimes influenced unexplained experiences, weird conditions, and mystical events? Would this approach be more fruitful than the self-understanding of scientific research as something that tends to develop a step by step linear progression, always moving from disorderly mass of observations towards rational truth? How we could move away from what Latour calls ready-made science, from foregrounded reality, from indisputable statements and from peer-reviewed papers with imposed corrections? How we could change such attitude that the facts or the truth always speak for themselves?

To address these questions Latour introduced actor-network theory. Its main aspect was that science (or the creation of scientific knowledge) is socially “networked” data, facts and experiences. It provides a significant ground for ethics since it challenges the philosophical standpoint of a thinker who has been always philosophising from outside of this world. However, climate change, the pandemic and the recent shifts in the geopolitical world forced us, philosophers, to suggest a new cosmology which does not any more conceive the outside world or events as something that happens out there and does not directly concern us. Many contemporary schools of philosophy, including phenomenology and feminist studies, have criticized science’s supposedly abstract view from nowhere, on which concepts, ideas and arguments are built.¹ In Latour’s ethics, there is no such standpoint as a view from nowhere and no eternal search for the truth. Latour [8] believes that the Anthropocene calls for an inclusive, reflective process that respects interdependency:

“avoid the trap of thinking that it would be possible to live in sympathy, in harmony with so-called “natural” agents. We are not seeking agreement among all these overlapping agents but we are learning to be dependent on them. No reduction, no harmony. The list of actors simply grows longer, the actors’ interests are encroaching on one another; all our powers of investigation are needed if we are to begin to find our place among these other actors” (p. 87).

Through actor-network theory, Latour [10] is challenging how we produce knowledge, how we account for the experiencer and its intimate modalities of existence among the tightly entangled world of other humans, plants, animals, endless microbes, innovative technologies, weird political contexts, and unpredictable geological forces, among all these complex ecosystems that create the gobelin of our macrocosm. Latour describes actor-networking as a framework of dynamic relational existence, between humans, non-humans, beings and matters of this world. It is, first of all, a practice of the “sociology of translation”. The practice of translating

transgresses the direct way of thinking since it is not only a transit from one word to another and not merely a search for the meaning of the words. Instead, Latour [10] explains translation as being relational and impactful: “a relation that does not transport causality but induces two mediators into coexisting” (p. 108).

This accent on coexisting stands close to Latour’s idea of caring. For instance, the practice of caring in doing philosophy is a method for reaching necessary goals through the exchange of meaning. As a practice of caring, translation intertwines humble inquiry, inclusive connection, and responsive action [11]. Humble inquiry is an endeavor to approach the other in a respectful way. In turn, inclusive connection is the empathetic feeling or even in certain cases an emotional attachment that we create in engaging with others and the world. Caring with responsive action is a practice of responding to the needs of the other.

The active agents of a network do not reciprocate in a very formal way. Following Latour’s explanation, in networking all actors are mutually engaged and this engagement serves as a transformative mode for all who are involved. Thus, Latour’s notion of care might be seen as deep translation, when the one who is translating finds intimate proximity with the other, reciprocates, and is inhabited by the other. This is how connections between the actors of the network are created and maintained. Latour writes [12]: “I use translation to mean displacement, drift, invention, meditation, the creation of a link that did not exist before and that to some degree modifies two elements or agents” (p. 32). By saying “the creation of a link”, Latour [9] seems to insist that the diversity of matters, species, and things of the world can be brought together, can be connected while “retaining their heterogeneity” (p. 473-474). The notion of translation does not belong to linguistic categories, rather it aspires to convey different states of our contemporary world and its processes. Latour notes that “there is no control and no all-power creator, either – more ‘God’ than man – but there is care, scruple, cautiousness, attention, contemplation, hesitation and revival”. I see such an understanding of caring translation to be one fruitful practice of indirect thinking.

There are still several problematic questions to reflect on which indeed have always been present in the history of humanity, but are timely even in our new posthuman era. To what extent should philosophical thinking stay sensible and tuned to the local geopolitical context? How could a philosopher propose an alternative to Latour’s translation of political and social matters, and, in a more general sense, an alternative way of translating the scientific tapestry of knowledge into the ethical one? What would be a right way to practice indirect thinking? How to bring doubts on the surface of philosophical discourse? How to unveil and bring into focus trajectories of traumatic experiences?

Donna Haraway agrees that Latour’s philosophical heritage represents a “a major landmark in our collective understanding of the corrosive, self-certain, and self-contained traps of nothing-but-critique. Cultivating response-ability requires much more from us. It requires the

¹ In *The View from Nowhere*, Thomas Nagel [13] questions the validity of an objective perspective in science and humanities and the roles of “the objective self” in construction of knowledge.

risk of being for some worlds rather than others and helping to compose those words with others". The emphasis here is on how our analytical engagement into the world, our knowledge, created meanings, and responsiveness can contextually exist together. For me the important question is: how can we preserve proximity with others and the otherness of the other in thinking with the other? The isolated and abstract fact cannot exist without being understood together with other agencies. For Latour, the search for truth rooted in isolated presuppositions and facts misses a search for the whole interconnected networking.

To summarize, even though Latour does not propose a complete analysis of care, his terms of translation and interdependent networking transgress the direct way of building facts and assumptions and preserves the coexistence of multiple actors and of the whole of networking. Even though Latour's account of the ethical aspects of networking theory are inspirational for thinking-with-care, I believe that the new perspectives of indirect philosophizing start in thinking-with other/s, while at the same time trying to consider and to accept vulnerability, exposedness, and alterity of the other. In the following chapter I will elaborate more on the concept of care and its possible implications in modes of thinking-with.

3. Thinking Together-with

Care ethics is a relatively new ethical theory, the starting points of which are usually located in Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* [6] and Nel Nodding's *Caring* [14]. The feminist thinkers emphasized that often the practice of care is bounded to the gender roles. Thus, girls and women are taught to be care givers, while boys and men are often ignoring this practice. There is always a gender question present as a background in ethics of care. However, the care thinking I want to bring into discussion goes beyond gender question, revealing ethical presence of subject and its being for the others. The theoretical discussion of care touches upon the generic "doing" of ontological significance, as a "species activity" with ethical, social, political, and cultural implications. Probably one of the most significant works on care is Joan C. Tronto's *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethics of Care* [16]. Addressing anthropology, sociology, and political studies, Tronto writes about conditions, resources, multicultural contexts, and standards of our society which shape our practices of care. She notes that our understanding of care is often measured by state ideologies and is connected to the imposed moral norms. Even if each of us said "yes, I care for my beloved ones, or for nature, or for people in war," following Tronto's line of reflection, we still need to shift the practice of care from its often peripheral location to the very center of our lives (p. 101). To reach out for this central role, care should aim at something completely other than the sphere of the self, avoiding self-reference. Of course, care should also lead to action.

Here is a difficult question to be asked: what kind of action can philosophical thinking do? Tronto notes that, semantically,

the notion of care is connected to the feeling of burden. To care is not just about showing the interest in someone's difficult situation or traumatic experience or feeling of pain but also about accepting a form of burden and/or to share the burden of the other. Tronto distinguishes four analytical phases of care: *care about*, *care for*, *care-giving* and *care-receiving*. One of the very beneficial and distinct definitions of care elaborated by Tronto [16] from different social and political angles is *caring about*: "caring about involves noting the existence of a need and marking an assessment that this need should be met. Caring about will often involve the position of another person or group to recognize the need" (p. 106). Thus, what I want is to develop further in indirect philosophy is its ability to give voices to those who need and to think with care.

However, here Tronto finds a problematic side of care. Care is no doubt a practice, and a theoretical concept as well. Moreover, one of the significant interpretations of care Tronto does is distinguishing care as an *activity* and as a *disposition*. While care, as an activity, despite the variety of debates involved, is more or less immediately understood, care as a disposition is more complex. Generally, it is defined as caring about caring, and it demonstrates an attitude [16]. To care about caring is to share emotional attitude and to participate in feelings of someone. Tronto criticizes this idea quite strongly. In *Moral Boundaries* she gives a quote by Jeffrey Blustein [3]:

"to care about caring is to care about one's ability to care deeply about things and people in general, to invest oneself in and devote oneself to something (or someone) or other.... The person who cares about caring is emotionally invested in being a caring person that is, a person who takes an interest in and devotes him or herself to things, activities, and people in his or her world" (p. 61-62).

This small paragraph shows that for Blustein caring is not so much about concrete actions but mostly about emotional engagement and participation.² For Tronto, this understanding of care as a disposition and as an attitude is very problematic. Her argument is that if we think of care solely in dispositional terms, then we inevitably think of care as strongly centered around the subject who cares. Tronto accentuates that the difficult part of care as a disposition is our tendency to adjust care to the worldview we already have: following the moral norms established by the state or by civilization, or, for instance, following the Christian worldview, where one must care for the neighbor or for the stranger. Here, the dangerous side of care is that in caring the subject tends to reinforce its own sphere and its own position (for example, being a good citizen or being a good Cristian, being a moral person). In such modalities of care the intention of care is not fulfilled and returns to the sphere of the self. One could say that such a perspective displays care as a sentimentalized and romanticized one.

Is thinking-with-care doomed to be just a disposition? In

² For instance, one could think about emoji widely used in social media which show care as disposition and as an emotional engagement. Without using words one could express emotional engagement by putting a heart, a crying face, or a face with hearts which actually has a word "caring."

Matters of Care Puig de la Bellacasa turns Tronto's critique into thinking as a practice, meaning that thinking with care is primarily thinking with, or together with other/s. Social, political, and cultural implications of care aim to involve very different actions which we could do to sustain, keep and repair our world so that we could not just survive but live in it. These interconnections would comprise our bodies, our feelings, our environment and all that we weave in a complex, life-supporting network.

Indeed, this definition of care sounds metaphorical and too wide. When writing about the notion of care, Tronto [16] also repeatedly puts emphasis on "everything." Still, care remains a challenge in the posthuman era. It is connected to our being affected by other/s or affecting other/s. And often the state of being affected can bring positive as well as negative outcomes: being self-centered, oppressive burden, reduction of the otherness, but also joy, responsibility, and even boredom. The maintenance of life, consideration of scientific data, and taking actions seem to be not enough to reveal a deeper structure of care. All these highlight moral intentions, as Tronto [16] and Puig de la Bellacasa [2] would say, without putting in the work to "care for".

It seems that thinking-with-care is never neutral and continuously raises questions of comparison: what is good care, what is it to care enough, for what and for whom care is needed. What do we really care for in accentuating something in writing? Instead of being the author or the subject who makes statements, care thinking in writing preserves the presence of the others, holding the space for the others in between sentences, letting the language shape inexpressible trajectories of traumas of the others.

Care thinking is emotional engagement and attitude which preserves the unrecognizable alterity of experiences of the others, escaping norms and the musts of the care practice. Also, care thinking involves a position of how it should be, or how we should care for. Thus, another side of care which comes into discussion is caring thinking as a political commitment. One of the dangerous processes of care is to fall into a fixed and defined normative framework of how to give voice to all these different (alternative) ways of existing, thinking, to all other species, to all marginalized and cast out from our everyday life discourse. Puig de la Bellacasa [2] underscores care as a living terrain that needs to be reclaimed almost every day from idealizing meanings, from constructed scientific evidence and data – and from direct association of care with love and empathy, so well employed by many care givers. It is worth saying that care with love has dangerous sides. Caring with love may exclude objective views and disconnect relations. Caring with love might focus too much on the individual object of care and "creates patterns of identity that reorder relations through excluding some" (p. 78). In other words, the networking of species always implies interconnected relations, but often the way we care can disconnect the actors of this world, excluding some of them and including others. For instance, caring for one small ecosystem and prioritizing the survival of one species from the perspective of the scientific subject, we could easily ignore the

species of the neighboring one, forgetting unnoticeable interdependency and equality of all actors. For example, we ignore the necessity of small piece of plastic garbage which would protect someone from the cold air and thus giving it more chances for survival. Thinking-with-care encourages us to think from the perspective of how to develop relationships rather than to disconnect them.

Thus, we don't only think with care driven by love and empathy. Latour, Tronto, Haraway, Puig de la Bellacasa and many others insist to see care as a vivid process, following Haraway's expression, as "staying with the trouble." This "staying with the trouble" requires a critical engagement. In *Matters of Care*, Puig de la Bellacasa [2] often repeats that traditionally the ethics of care has ignored the practicing of care in favor of analyzing moral norms of what to do. The task of philosophy is not to categorize care into boxes of moral acts. Rather, in indirect philosophizing we need to accentuate the potential energy of care to be able to disrupt and to shake the neutrality of academic philosophizing, to shake the traditional moral rigidity still present in our ways of making philosophy. Caring thinking is to keep questioning the boundaries that falsely define human and non-human realms.

Thus, once more I could underline the main point of this essay: following Puig de la Bellacasa, caring thinking is writing-with and thinking-with. I believe that the aim of thinking with care is to voice extreme expediences of vulnerability. It is primarily thinking-with other/s.

In *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna J. Haraway advances this idea by emphasizing the distinction between two terms – sympoiesis and autopoiesis. The notion of sympoiesis stands close to the practice of thinking-with, i. e. it translates as making-with, while autopoiesis stresses self-making and self-expressing. Thinking-with is staying, or being together with the troubles and turbulences of all processes of our life. Thinking-with is to embrace all species, humans, non-humans, experiences, and all unidentified phenomena of this world. Thinking-with is to be multiple and to nourish this multiplicity and variety.

It is an embracement and encompass of multiplicity, which is the essence of thinking with care. The peculiar feature of thinking with care is that the thought becomes embodied in the world one cares for [2]. It is a practice of holding space and place for others, for all equal and interconnected agents of this net-worked world. In this way, thinking-with-care opposes academic philosophical thinking. For Puig de la Bellacasa [2],

"thinking with care is to affirm the worth of a distinctive style of connecting thinking and writing that troubles the predictable academic isolation of consecrated authors by the way it gathers and explicitly honors the collective web one thinks with rather than using others's thinking as a background against which to foreground one's own" (p. 75-76).

This approach also involves resisting a form of academic thinking based on positioning theories and authors. Thinking-with-care is a process which is not about creating meanings or indicating goals but about generating communality of equal agencies of this world and

interconnective relations between them. It is about ignoring boundaries between disciplines and schools of philosophy.

Importantly, Puig de la Bellacasa [2] notes that “instead of reinforcing the self of a lone thinker’s figure, the voice in such a text seems to keep saying: I am not alone. There are many, many others” (p. 77). Thinking with care and writing with care do not focus only on caring for the one but reinforce singularity, see the potentiality of multiplicity, and acknowledge the existence of more-than-one-interdependencies. As Puig de la Bellacasa says, thinking with care is both speculative and descriptive. It is a new way of describing situations and contexts, but it also connects diversities and maintains differences. The emphasis here is not only on contrasts and possible contradictions but on understanding constantly arising new interdependencies.

Thinking-with is also living with all these marginalized experiences of agents. We are not only analyzing and studying other/s but in thinking with we also live-with the other/s. In *The Companion Species Manifesto*, Donna Haraway [4] writes that “dogs are not an alibi for other themes. ... Dogs are not surrogates for theory; they are not here just to think with. They are here to live with” (p. 5). The same position would be applied to all other species of the world. Thinking with care and together with initiates a process in which humans, non-humans, and our technologies could coexist with each other on a common terrain and could preserve a relationship of “significant otherness”.³ The creation and maintenance of these relations of “significant otherness” are more than about being aware of difference and of ways of coexisting. The difficult part of such networking is to live with the troubles of the other/s in thinking, and this position can possibly influence the world we live in.

At the very end of these reflections, I would like to tackle another component of thinking-with-care – thinking-for. Thinking-for is to think from marginalized experiences and living with those who are outcast and expelled. Such a practice of involvement could help to cultivate alternative epistemologies. This is not an easy task since it presupposes diving into dirty and peripheric experiences and situations.

As Donna J. Haraway [5] writes: “The point is to make a difference in the world, to cast our lot for some ways of life and not others. To do that, one must be in action, be finite and dirty, not transcendent and clean” (p. 36). Thinking-with-care for the other is often to be dirty, uncomfortable and awkward. The “for” is an act of responsiveness that we keep staying vigilant of the possibilities for abuse the equality of diverse actors in networking of this world. Indeed, the “for” implies also being responsible for the other in the way we think and write. Thus, the aim of thinking-with-care would be to expand an ability to respond. To put it differently, to think-with-care is to cultivate intertwined responsiveness and attentiveness and to dive into such levels of networking which have never been accepted into the dominating discourse of our social realm.

And, thus, what is most important in this discussion is a transformation produced by thinking-with-care: knowledge and ethics are not just abstract assumptions made by the external observer but they become situated in the interconnected weave of the world.

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3 An example of thinking with and living with is a book *The Secret Life of Plants* by Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird which explores physical, biological, mystical and spiritual relations between plants, trees, and man [15].