The Possibility of Consciousness in Plant Life

I've always been a sucker for philosophy. I love the way it enables you to push your mind into places it hasn't been before. I am particularly interested in the kinds of philosophical problems that seem as though the human brain was never designed to cope with them. I find these problems especially fascinating. Perhaps I can't resist a challenge.

One of the problems which I enjoy throwing my mind at every now and then is the concept of non-human forms of consciousness. Not merely a consciousness that works differently to the human variety, but one which doesn't make any sense in human terms.

A readily visible example of this is the collective consciousness, aka hive mind. The collective consciousness can be observed in some insect species, as well as in many sci-fi species, such as Star Trek's The Borg, the beings described in Alien (to be honest with you, I'm not sure just how "collective" the Aliens really are) and Warhammer 40,000's Tyranids. The primary difference between a hive mind and consciousness as we understand it is that participants in a full-blown collective have no regard for the individual. Each discrete physical lifeform is only aware of its function and purpose within the collective.

This concept is at once simple and mind-boggling. While it sounds basic enough on the surface, if I am to be honest with myself I must admit that I don't quite comprehend it. I am a human, I am designed to place emphasis on the individual which constitutes "me". Therefore I find it impossible to fully grasp the concept of having no individuality whatsoever.

But what of other, entirely different forms of consciousness? What of forms of consciousness so foreign, so totally beyond the human sphere of understanding, that nobody has even imagined them? I would not be at all surprised if such a thing existed.

Consider, for example, a form of consciousness that did not operate on a linear basis with respect to time! I have no idea how this could possibly work, but that doesn't mean it can't. After all, the Christian God is assumed to exist outside of time, in some deliciously unfathomable manner.

And now, at last, I arrive at the main point. Namely, what might we think of the possible consciousness of plant life? Since plant life is so biologically foreign to us, we cannot justifiably reject the possibility. To push the point even further, we cannot reject the possibility that some or all plants are fully self-aware. What do we really know about plants? We know plenty about their cellular makeup, their metabolic structure, their reproductive systems. But we have absolutely no clue about the level of awareness that plants have of themselves or their environment.

It has been proven that plants respond to physical stimuli by their growth patterns - any photosynthesising plant will grow towards light, "creeping" plants will grow in conformance with a supporting structure, and check out the node on thigmomorphogenesis for a cool example. It has been claimed by rather a lot of people that plants respond to positive attention. I'm not talking about a good watering every now and then, I'm talking about actually talking to the plants. I've also heard that plants enjoy better growth when exposed to pleasant music.

If we are working with the understanding that plants are no more conscious than a single-cell organism, and merely react to their immediate environment and how it might serve their survival ("I feel light. Light is good. Move toward light"), this claim makes no sense. How could such a basic lifeform possibly react to an emotional stimulus? Worse - how could it react to a human emotional stimulus?

I'd like to present a thoroughly weird and possibly silly idea at this point in the ramble. What if it's all just energy transfers?

Now the first thing I think when I look at that phrase is "Sheesh, BJ, you sound like a New Age twit trying to tout the healing powers of gluing a quartz crystal to your forehead at the quarter-moon." I wouldn't be at
all surprised if you are thinking something similar. But rest assured, my patient reader, I'm not as half-baked as all that. No sir. I am fully baked.

Seriously. Why not? Physicists will tell you that everything in the physical world is based around energy - its various forms and what happens when it changes between these forms. Is it so difficult to believe that there are forms of energy which don't impact directly on the physical world? Energies which relate specifically to the well-being of, for want of a better word, souls. What exactly am I implying here? Well, I'm suggesting that a type of energy exists which can be communicated between (sufficiently conscious) living beings, and that gaining quantities of this energy correlates to personal growth and happiness.

I'd like to describe a situation from human interaction which may make my idea sound a little less ludicrous. Have you ever had a friend and / or SO come to you, needing a shoulder to cry on? Chances are, you have. Everyone needs it at some point. Have you ever supplied the shoulder service to someone who was depressed? I tell you, it's a dangerous pastime. On a personal note, when I started having a romantic relationship with my SO, I was acting as the shoulder on an almost daily basis. My caring was helping to keep her afloat, but you can't take on that much despair and bitterness without it wiping you out. Sometimes I would come out of these sessions barely able to walk because of the intense feeling of having been drained. It felt like there was something I needed, something which gave me will and strength and motivation, and by giving so much of it to her, I was left with a minimal supply. This thing which I was transferring to her could quite easily be thought of as energy - or indeed as something so similar to energy as makes little difference.

You could think of the above as an example of a one-way energy transfer. It flows out from one person into the other - gifting the recipient with some buoyancy, but leaving the donor feeling as though "I caent doo it capn... I doont haeve the poower!" But there are instances of a two-way transfer. When you express love and caring towards someone and they fully reciprocate, well, both parties walk away with a smile on their face. Seems as though both persons involved in the transfer gain energy. Perhaps this violates the Conservation of Energy law, but hey, this is all hypothetical here.

From this idea, it is a small step to see why kind words and nice music improve the health and well-being of plant life. Why shouldn't plants be able to transfer energy in the same way humans do? After all, this whole energy transfer idea represents a base form of communication between living things... something so intrinsic that all other forms of communication are simply interface layers on top of it.

Well, that just about does it. I've certainly enjoyed embarking on this little spiel. I do hope that it didn't suck.