

Gardening – Philosophy for Everyone: Cultivating wisdom

Dan O'Brien (ed). (2014). Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

A Philosophy of Gardens

David E. Cooper. (2006). Oxford: OUP

The renowned psychoanalyst Nina Coltart wrote

...in an ideal world, all psychotherapists would have a garden.

(Coltart, 1993: p 98)

As a therapist and garden owner I get a warm, slightly virtuous feeling every time I read this line. What is her point? Surely it is about being outside and engaging with nature, a practice which revives the spirit and provides the perfect antidote to hours spent with clients. Whether we have a garden or not Coltart's quote makes us think – to take stock of the *ordinary* garden and reflect upon its role and meaning. What are gardens for, or why do we garden? These are age-old philosophical questions. The books reviewed here tackle this subject but in two very different ways.

Gardening: Philosophy for Everyone is divided into five parts: The Good Life, Flower Power, The Flower Show, The Cosmic Garden and Philosopher's Gardens, with roughly three to four essays per section. O'Brien has collected a diverse group of authors who survey the central theme using an esoteric range of topics, from 'Brussels Sprouts and Empire: Putting Down Roots' (Moss) to 'The Garden of the Aztec Philosopher-King' (Evans). Each chapter is scholarly and well written. These different perspectives demonstrate the variety of creative approaches that can be taken to understand the topic. I found the ethics on hurting plants particularly intriguing in 'Escaping Eden: Plant Ethics in a Gardener's World' (Hall). Two chapters stand out as being particularly relevant for psychotherapists: 'The Virtues of Gardening' (Brook) and 'Cultivating Our Garden: David Hume and Gardening as Therapy' (O'Brien). A large number of chapters, although fascinating, seemed less concerned with the philosophy of gardens and more focused on history, classics or sociology. My criticism is thus with the title, which I found somewhat misleading. *Gardening: Philosophy for Everyone* is essentially a collection of essays aimed at garden enthusiasts or serious philosophy students rather than 'Everyone'.

Turning now to the nature of gardening itself, Brook's chapter advocates gardening as a way of cultivating the 'good-life', meaning Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, and describes gardening as developing the following qualities: care, humility, hope and self-mastery. The key word here seems to be **care**;