

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**;

for gardens to matter we need to care – we need to be invested in the cultivation and nurturing of soil and plants. One result of such care is that we gain distance from our inner world and its all-too-consuming thought process. This is care in the Heideggerian sense of the word. We are familiar with *care* from *Being and Time* but in his later works Heidegger develops his thinking further in conjunction with dwelling. In the essay ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’ he says

To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell.....to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine.

(Heidegger, 1971: p 145)

Late Heidegger is often criticized for being anti-technology and idealizing the rural life. But perhaps we shouldn’t be too hasty in dismissing his musings because these two books expound the benefits of ‘tilling the soil’. In another book on garden philosophy the writer Robert Pogue Harrison sums up the relationship between care and meaning:

...life of action, pervaded through and through by care, is what has always rendered human life meaningful. Only in the context of such meaningfulness could the experience of life acquire depth and density...

(Harrison, 2008: p 10)

Beside the title my other comment about O’Brien’s book is the approach, which to me seems so diverse. In bringing together such an array of essays the central quest of the book (the philosophy of gardens) becomes lost. It is a topic that is, by its very nature, an elusive one.

A Philosophy of Gardens: is a slim book, rich in philosophical arguments, complex at times to the point of distraction. Nevertheless, for me, it is *the* definitive study on the subject and well worth a read. Cooper’s effective use of philosophical insights from ancient Greece to Buddhism is masterful. Although intensely philosophical, his understanding of gardens makes the arguments accessible and practical. Cooper’s book has a more cohesive focus when addressing such issues as – Why do we garden? Is a garden art? What do gardens embody? What is the good life? His ‘modest’ proposal (his words) in the form of a conclusion is that

The Garden exemplifies a co-dependence between human endeavour and the natural world

(Cooper, 2006: p 145)

O'Brien in fact makes a similar point

...gardens in general, should not be seen purely as artistic achievements or as embodiments of the good life; they are essentially places where we can become enchanted by the fusion of man and nature.

(O'Brien, 2014: p 7)

Many of the authors in *Gardening: Philosophy for Everyone* (O'Brien) make reference to or draw on Cooper's book, which was published eight years earlier. Perhaps this, more than anything else, underlines the status of *A Philosophy of Gardens* as a key text in the field.

A garden can be a calming space, a place for meditation – think of *karesansui* (the Japanese rock and gravel gardens). Some would question whether these are really gardens at all? This again highlights the esoteric nature of the central theme – articulating the philosophy gardens. A garden can also be a metaphor for paradise (Eden or the Chahar bagh – Persian paradise garden) or it can be an existential theatre where the human condition is played out. Each of these approaches is explored in Cooper's book.

In his conclusion Cooper highlights two themes – firstly, the dialectic or co-dependence between human endeavor and the natural world – an existential theme familiar to us as therapists. He argues the tension between these polarities is held and made manifest in the garden. The second is the garden as a form of presence, a space where things are allowed to be – in Cooper's words 'engagement with The Garden is 'in the truth'' (Cooper, 2006: p 157). Here he is influenced and informed by Heidegger's thinking on *Gelassenheit* and *Dwelling*.

The serene gardener who 'releases' and cares for the products of the earth, therefore, exemplifies or embodies the relationship of co-dependence: the relation, in Heidegger's vocabulary, between a human agency that 'releases' things and the inconspicuous 'ground' of the world that presences for human beings.

(Cooper, 2006: p 160)

I found both books stimulating. Reflecting on them as a gardener and therapist I was left pondering a number of questions. How consciously do we address professional self-care issues? Is it possible to define the good life? Is the garden a helpful metaphor for Being? Heidegger in his later thinking might say 'yes'.

Dwelling, however is the basic character of Being in keeping with which mortals exist.

(Heidegger, 1971: p 158)