

*A Philosophy of Gardens* by David E. Cooper (Clarendon Press 2006)  
reviewed for *Philosophical Books*

How wonderful to have a philosophical exploration of gardens. For those of us wrapped up in this unusual topic of philosophical discussion Cooper's book is inevitably of great interest. Also one needs to have thought about this area long and hard to understand exactly what an unwieldy beast it is and the magnitude of the problem of writing a coherent thesis about it. William Shenstone in 1764 bagged the most appropriate title for much garden writing with his essay 'Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening'. What Cooper manages to do is bring order and cogent thought to the task of explaining the way in which gardens carry the intense significance they do for so many. The opening chapter is rather convoluted and doesn't serve the book well but the rest is excellent. His conclusion is that "The Garden exemplifies a co-dependence between human endeavour and the natural world" and that "this co-dependence itself embodies or refers us to the co-dependence of human existence and the 'deep ground' of the world and ourselves" and it does this "By embodying something that itself embodies something further"(p.145). The something further points to a kind of mystery though not one that requires any particular, or indeed any, religious affiliation.

The route by which this conclusion is reached takes us through a discussion of the specific nature of the aesthetic appreciation of gardens with a helpful separation and dismissal of seeing gardens as art or as nature or indeed as a combination of art and nature. The dismissal of the 'combination of the two thesis' could be viewed as a little strained. It proceeds by first rejecting the idea, he sees as implicit in the combination thesis, that if one still has the two modes of appreciation – art and nature- then nothing particularly important is lost to the realm of aesthetic appreciation if there were no gardens. Also that even other combining art forms such as ballet are not seen as simply combining an appreciation of music with an appreciation of bodies moving through space. When moving on to what is specific to the appreciation of gardens, that is not catered for or tends not to be emphasised by the 'combination thesis', we seem on surer ground. In a treatment of atmosphere, which uses Merleau-Ponty's notion of a "field of presence" (p.49), and of the holism of the garden Cooper lays out the real problems with not according the place making and embodied experiencing aspects of gardens a specific aesthetic realm of appreciation. This is where one can see clearly that Cooper is really on to something and has himself reached a deep appreciation of the nature of gardens rather than just an extensive knowledge of what has been said about them.

In unpacking how that kind of appreciation comes about we encounter not just the obvious idea of the garden as a place for contemplation but also the practices inherent in gardening. This helps to shift the idea of the garden even further from the spectacle that could be construed as art to a place of engagement and the expression and honing of virtues. It also makes the surprising, but defended, point that gardening is not a hobby. As Cooper says: "The life of a serious gardener is not one that, as it happens, involves some gardening. Instead, it is one partly defined by

the structured, regular activities which are imposed once the decision to grow and to garden has been made” (p.75). Chapter five on ‘Gardens and the Good Life’ makes sense of the virtue ethic claim and indeed would be an excellent introduction - to whet the appetite - for virtue ethics itself. Here Cooper takes the striking claim that gardening can bring about and enhance the internal practices that make up the good life and cashes out that claim with regard to particular activities that gardening entails and conversely the vices it can harbour.

The book brings together the thoughts of a number philosophers in the service of the points to be made and, very admirably, has them rub shoulders with excellent garden writers such as Michael Pollan. What is most notable though is the way Cooper manages to develop a line of argument without at the same time destroying the sense of reverie that the garden can induce and it is only by dwelling in that sense that we can begin to appreciate the meaning and significance of gardens.

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